Boundaries in Marriage
- Sunday School Notes -

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Boundaries are the personal property lines which define who we are, what we are responsible for, and where we have limits and limitations. Having clear boundaries is essential for a healthy, balanced lifestyle as well as for spiritual growth and for our ability to give and receive love. Yet many Christians lack boundaries because they fear being selfish, unloving, and unsubmissive.

In this Sunday School Series, which is based on the books `` *Boundaries*" and ``*Boundaries in Marriage*" by Drs. Henry Cloud & John Townsend, we want to take a biblical view of boundaries and in particular of boundaries in marriage. We will study what boundaries are and why they are necessary for our Christian walk. We will then look at ways to solve common boundaries conflicts with ourselves, friends, our work, our family, our children, and our spouse. Afterwards we will focus on building proper boundaries and resolving conflicts in our marriage. Finally we will discuss how to avoid the misuse of boundaries and to develop healthy ones instead.

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Introduction

In the past year we have discussed the issue of leadership and submission in the family. We have looked in detail at the roles that God has given to husbands and wives in a marriage, at possible reasons why we fail to fulfill this God-given role, and ways to overcome these problems.

Today, I want to begin a new series, which looks at marriage from a different perspective and shall help us to deal with the practical problems that we have to face every day.

Most of us come to Sunday School because we try to live our lives in the right way and hope to find some inspiration how to do that. We try to do a good job with our marriage, raise our children in the right way, be responsible and successful in our job,

maintain or build relationships with family and friends, in all that be a witness for Christ, do a god job at church, and of course spend enough time with our Lord as well. Often we feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of duties we have.

Many of us have the impression that we simply can't do it. We just don't seem to have enough time to do everything we have to do. We struggle with our finances, because we want a nice home for our family, a good education for our children, enable them to have a good life, and our income doesn't seem to allow us to do that and still give our tithe to the Lord. In addition to that illnesses get into our way and make both our time and financial problems more difficult. And the people around us don't make it easy for us - most of all the people we feel closest to.

Life puts a lot of pressure on us and occasionally we get the feeling that everyday life is just beyond our control. And Christians struggle with this problem more often than the rest of the world, because they feel responsible for so many things and people around them and have a hard time saying ``*no*".

As an illustration I would like to read a description of a typical day of a typical Christian mother who is just loaded with burdens. It's a fairly long story but I would like you to listen closely and tell me later what you think the cause for all these problems were.

6:00 a.m.:
The alarm jangled. Bleary-eyed from too little sleep, Sherrie shut off the noisy intruder, turned on the bedside lamp, and sat up in bed.

``*Why am I dreading this day? Lord, didn't you promise me a life of joy?*"

Then, as the cobwebs left her mind, Sherrie remembered the reason for her dread: the four-o'clock meeting with Todd's third-grade teacher. The phone call returned to her memory: ``Sherry, this is Jean Russell. I wonder if we could meet about Todd's performance and his ...behavior."

Todd couldn't keep still and listen to his teachers. He didn't even listen to Sherrie and Walt. He was such a strong-willed child, and she didn't want to quench his spirit. Wasn't that more important?

``Well, no time to worry about that right now. I've got enough troubles to keep me busy all day." Under the shower, Sherrie's mind moved our of first gear. She began mentally ticking of the day's schedule. Todd, nine, and Amy, six, would have been a handful even if she *weren't* a working mother.

``Let's see ...fix breakfast, pack two lunches, and finish sewing Amy's costume for the school play. That will be a trick - finishing the costume before the car pool picks her up at 7:45."

Sherry thought regretfully about last night. She had planned to work on Amy's costume then but her mother had dropped in unexpectantly. The memories of her attempts to salvage the time weren't pretty.

Trying to be diplomatic, Sherry had told her mother, ``you can't imagine how much I enjoy your surprise visits, Mom. But I was wondering, if you would mind if I sew Amy's costume while we talk?"

``Sherry, you know I would be the last to intrude on your time with the family." Sherrie's mother, widowed for twelve years, had elevated her widowhood to the status of martyrdom. ``I mean, since your father died, it's been such an empty time. I still miss our family. How could I deprive you of that for yourself?"

I bet I find out how. Sherry thought to herself.

``That's why I can understand why you don't bring Walt and the children to see me much anymore. How could I be entertaining. I am just an old lady who gave her entire life to her children. Who would want to spend any time with me?"

``No, Mom, no,no, no! That's not what I meant at all! I mean ... it's so special to have you over here. Goodness knows, with our schedule, we'd like to visit more, but we just haven't been able to. That's why I am so glad that you took the initiative." *Lord, don't strike me dead for this little lie*, she prayed silently. ``In fact, I can do the costume anytime. Now, why don't I make us some coffee?"

Her mother sighed. ``All right, if you insist. But I just hate to think that I am intruding."

The visit lasted way into the night. By the time her mother left, Sherry felt absolutely crazy, but she justified it to herself. *At least I have helped to make her lonely day a little brighter.* Then a pesky voice piped up. *If you helped so much, why was she still talking about her loneliness when she left?*

6:45 a.m.
Sherrie returned to the present. ``No use crying over spilt time," she mumbled to herself she struggled to close the zipper of her black linen skirt. Her favorite suit had become, like many others, too tight. *Middle-age spread so soon?* she thought. *This week I really have to go on a diet and start exercising.*

The next hour was, as usual, a disaster. The kids whined about getting out of bed and Walt complained, ``Can't you get the kids to the table in time?"

7:45 a.m.
Miraculously, the kids made it to their rides, Walt left for Work in his car, and Sherrie went out, closed the front door after her, and rushed to work.
4:00 p.m.
Most of the day passed uneventfully. She was out on the way out of the office to the teacher's meeting, when her boss, Jeff Moreland, flagged her down.

``Glad, I caught up with you, Sherrie. Listen, I am in a time crunch," he said, handing her a large sheaf of papers. ``This is the data for the final recommendations for the Kimbrough account. All it needs is a little writing and editing. And it's due tomorrow. But I'm sure it'll be no problem for you."

Sherrie panicked. Jeff's ``editing'' needs were legendary. Sherrie saw a minimum of five hour's work. *I had this data in to him three weeks ago! Why does this man get off having me save his face for his deadline?*

Quickly she composed herself. ``Sure, Jeff. No problem. Glad I can help. What time do you need it?''

``Nine o'clock would be fine. And ...thanks, Sherrie. I always think of you when I am in a jam. You're so dependable''

4:30 p.m.
The meeting with Todd's teacher began, as so many before, without Walt. Todd's father hadn't been able to get off work, so the two women talked alone.

``He's not a bad child, Sherrie. Todd is a bright, energetic boy. When he minds, he is one of the most enjoyable kids in the class. The problem is, that he doesn't respond well to limits. For example, during our task period, when children work on assignments, Todd has great difficulty. He gets up from his desk, pesters other kids, and won't stop talking. When I mention to him that his behavior is inappropriate, he becomes enraged and obstinate.''

Sherrie felt defensive about her only son. ``Maybe Todd has an attention-deficit problem, or he's hyperactive?''

Mrs. Russell shook her head. ``When Todd's second grade teacher wondered about that last year, psychological tests ruled that out. He stays on tasks very well when he's interested in the subject. I am no therapist, but it seems to me that he's just not used to responding to rules.''

``Are you saying this is some sort of home problem?''

Mrs. Russell looked uncomfortable. ``As I said, I am no therapist. I just know that in third grade most children resist rules. But Todd is off the scale. Any time I tell him to do something he doesn't want to it's World War III. And since all his intellectual and cognitive testing comes out normal, I was just wondering how things were at home.''

Sherrie could no longer hold back her tears. ``I need to be honest with you. Walt and I have a real struggle making Todd mind at home. When we're playing or talking, Todd is the most wonderful son I could imagine. But any time I have to discipline him, the tantrums are more than I can handle. So I guess, I don't have a solution for you.''

Jean nodded her head slowly. ``It really helps me, Sherrie, to know that Todd's behavior is a problem at home, too. At least now we can put our heads together on a solution.

7:00 p.m.
Halfway through the dinner, the phone rang. Sherrie jumped up from the table to answer the phone. ``Hope I'm not disturbing anything,'' said Phillis Renfrow, the women's ministries leader at church. ``Sherrie, I am in deep water. Margie was going

to be our activities coordinator at the retreat and now she's canceled. Something about `priorities at home'. Any way you can pitch in?"

The retreat. Sherrie had almost forgotten that the annual gathering of church women was this weekend. She had actually been looking forward to leaving the kids and Walt behind and strolling through the beautiful mountainous area for two days, just herself and the Lord. In fact, the possibility of solitude felt better to her than the planned group activities. Taking on Margie's activities coordinator position would mean giving up her precious alone time. No, it wouldn't work. She would just have to say ....

But automatically, her second thought pattern intervened. *What a privilege to serve. Sherrie! By giving up a little portion of your life, by letting go of your selfishness, you can actually make a big difference in some lives. Think it over!*

Sherrie didn't have to think it over. She was used to responding unquestioningly to this familiar voice, just as she responded to her mother's, and Phyllis', and maybe God's. ``I'll be happy to help. Just send me whatever Margie has done."

Phyllis sighed, audibly relieved. ``Sherrie, I know it's a sacrifice. But isn't that the abundant Christian life? Being living sacrifices."

If you say so, Sherrie thought. But she couldn't help wondering when the ``abundant" part would come in.

7:45 p.m.
Dinner finally finished. Sherrie watched Walt position himself in front of the TV. Todd reached for the phone, asking if his friends could come over. Amy slipped unobserved into her room.

The dishes stayed on the table. The family hadn't quite gotten the hang of helping yet. But maybe the kids were still a little young for that. Sherrie started clearing the dishes from the table.

11:30 p.m.
Years ago, Sherrie could have cleaned up after dinner, gotten the kids to bed on time, and performed Jeff's handed-off project with ease. A cup of coffee after dinner and the adrenaline rush galvanized Sherrie into superhuman feats of productivity. She wasn't called ``Super Sherrie" for nothing!

But it was becoming noticeably harder these days. More and more the was having trouble concentrating, forgetting dates and deadlines, and not even caring a great deal about it all. But by sheer will-power, she had completed most of her tasks now. Now she had to get on with her real task for the evening: her talk with Walt.

Her and Walt's courtship and early marriage had been pleasant. But over the years, she had noted a shift in the relationship. It started subtly, but then became more pronounced. She saw it in the lack of respect in his eyes, when she tried to tell him about her need for more support from him, in his insistent demands for her to do things *his* way, and in his temper and anger.

At first, she had thought she was imagining things. Later, she had tried ``Loving Walt out of His Anger''. But nothing really worked and she felt that her love for her husband was eroding. And that was, what tonight was all about. Things needed to change. Somehow, they needed to rekindle the flames of their first love.

Sherrie walked into the family room. ``Honey, can we talk?'' There was no answer. Walt had fallen asleep on the couch. She turned off the TV and lights and walked into the bedroom.

11:50 p.m.
Lying in bed, Sherrie couldn't tell which was greater, her loneliness or her exhaustion. She picked up her Bible and opened it to the New Testament. *Please, Lord, give me something to hope for*. Her eyes fell on the words of Christ in Matthew 5:3-5: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

But Lord, I already feel poor in spirit. I mourn over my life, my marriage, my children. I try to be gentle, but I just feel run over all the time. Where is your promise? Where is your hope? Where are you?

Sherrie waited in the darkened room for an answer. None came. The only sound was the quiet pit-pat of her tears running off her cheeks and onto the pages of her Bible.

We probably can all identify with Sherrie's dilemma - her helplessness, her confusion, her isolation, the feeling of guilt, and the feeling that life has gotten out of control.

But what is the cause of all that? Is it just an accumulation of bad circumstances that will go away after a while? Or would things get better if she were to try harder? What did you observe while listening to her story?

- She spends a lot of energy on trying to be successful
- She tries to please people without getting the close relationships she wants.
- She is taking responsibility for the feelings and problems of others
- She doesn't take ownership of her own life.

The last items are the key to her problem and those of many Christians. *We fail to take ownership of our own life while taking responsibility for the lives of others.* This is *not* how God wanted us to be. After creating us in his own image, he told us

*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (**Genesis 1:28**)*

God gave us responsibility for certain tasks. And part of this responsibility is knowing what *is* our job, and what is *not*. People who constantly take on duties that aren't theirs will eventually burn out. We hear about such burn-outs quite often and it always involves people who seem to have a great sense of responsibility and reliability. But their true problem is *not* that others abuse them or that they have too many duties. It is

that they take on problems that were never intended to be theirs while neglecting their own life.

Married Christians are probably much stronger affected by this than any other people. Most of us have no greater desire than a lifetime of love and commitment of the air, and onto the person with whom we share our life. We want to become one flesh with our spouse. This is what marriage is about:

*Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (**Genesis 2:24**)*

Marriage is about love, care, need, and companionship of two people who overcome immaturity and selfishness in order to form something better than what each person alone can produce. Love is at the center of marriage, but love cannot grow without *freedom* and *responsibility*. When we are free to disagree, then we are free to love. If we are not, we live in fear and love dies. When we both take responsibility to do what is best for our marriage, then love can grow. If we don't, then one of us will take too much responsibility and resent it and the other will not take on enough and become self-centered.

But freedom and responsibility requires us to respect *boundaries*, that is the invisible property lines which describe where a person begins and where it ends. Within these boundaries, a person must be able to act freely without being controlled by anybody else, and to take on responsibility for everything that happens. The mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for our lives are the essence of our personality. If we can't set and respect appropriate boundaries at appropriate times, we will easily run into serious problems without ever finding out how we got into all this mess.

But setting boundaries is very difficult, since there are many questions that need to be answered:

- Can I set limits and still be a loving person?
- How can I set limits without being selfish?
- How do boundaries relate to submission?
- What if somebody is upset or hurt by my boundaries?
- Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?
- How do I react to someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?
- What are legitimate boundaries, anyhow?

Misinformation about the Bible's answers to these questions has led to a lot of misunderstandings and problems that result from the absence of proper boundaries. In the weeks to come we want to take a biblical view of *boundaries* and particularly of *boundaries in marriage* that will help us to live our faith practically in everyday life and to grow in our marriage towards the blessed union that God intends us to have.

We will discuss what they are and why they are necessary. We will look at various boundaries conflicts with ourselves, friends, our work, family, children, and our spouse - and how we can deal with them. We will then look in detail at building proper boundaries and resolving conflicts in our marriage; and finally clarify some

misunderstandings that help us to develop healthy boundaries while avoiding their misuse.

In all this we should keep one thing in our mind. Setting boundaries is not about fixing, changing, or punishing our spouse or other people. It is not about *somebody else* grow up. It is about us, about learning self-control - one of the nine fruits of the spirits described in **Galatians 5:23** - and about taking ownership of our own life, so that we are protected enough to allow love to grow.

General Principles

In the previous section we have illustrated how a boundaryless life can deprive us of the healthy, balanced lifestyle that we need for our spiritual growth and for our ability to give and receive love. Yet there are many Christians who lack boundaries, because they fear being selfish, unloving, and unsubmissive. We will therefore begin with the theoretical foundations - what are boundaries, what are they not, and why are they necessary - before we look at ways to solve common boundaries conflicts, particularly those in a marriage.

What is a boundary?

Many Christians have difficulties with the term ``boundaries", because they have observed it being abused for selfish purposes and as an excuse for not allowing God to guide our life. Understanding the nature of boundaries therefore requires us to understand what boundaries should *not* be.

Misunderstandings about Boundaries

People have a lot of misconceptions of what boundaries really are. They view boundaries as

- an excuse for doing what they want or for not helping others,
- as limits they set on *other* people,
- as walls for avoiding close relationships between them and others,
- putting God in a box
- as their private zone from where they want to exclude everyone else, even God
- as a means for fixing or changing their spouse, children, and others,
- as an ultimatum, a means to control others through unproportional consequences
- as a punishment for misbehavior

People who understand boundaries in this way, use the expression ``*setting boundaries*" just as an excuse for selfishness and an unwillingness to submit to God or anybody else. But that is not what boundaries are. In fact, the meaning of the term ``*boundaries*" has been twisted by the world so much that Christians have become afraid of using it - just because they don't know the original meaning of the word anymore. It is the same with the word ``*love*", which often is confused with selfish desire and lust, or at least with sentimentality. But should that keep us from using the term in the right way?

Central Aspects

Setting boundaries has little to do with limiting *others* - it is about learning *self-control* - one of the nine fruits of the spirits described in **Galatians 5:22-23**:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (self-control): against such there is no law

and about taking ownership of our own life, so that we can grow in our faith and develop mature relationships with other people, particularly with our spouse.

So what is a boundary, anyway?

A Property Line: Ownership and Freedom

In the simplest sense, a boundary is a property line. It denotes the beginning and the end of something. In the physical world, boundaries are often easy to see - fences, walls, signs, hedges, or sometimes only a slightly different appearance of the lawn. All this signs indicate the borderline of someone's property. Within these boundaries, the owner is fully responsible for the property, while others are not.

In the mental, emotional, and spiritual world, boundaries - although less easy to see - are just as real as in the physical world. They define our person, who we are and who we are not. We are the owners of everything inside these boundaries. We are free to do with it as we choose but we are also fully responsible for it. That is how God has designed us: we have been given a free will and many talents, but we are responsible for using God's gift wisely. We ``own" our soul and that also means that we have to deal with what is in it. **Proverbs 14:10** says:

The heart knows its own bitterness; and no one else can share its joy.

Yes, we can share a lot with other people, but we are the only ones who really experience what is going on in our own heart. We are the only ones who can *protect* it from bad influences, we are the only ones who can nurture it with good things. God has entrusted us with a life for which we will later be held responsible. But how can we do that, if we don't understand what our boundaries are? That is why we need to learn from the Word of God, where our property begins and where it ends.

I have seen many people struggle with life, just because they do not take responsibility for their *own* life and expect others to step in instead. They blame others for what happens to them and even for what they do themselves. And at the same time they spend a lot of time and energy on other people for whom they feel responsible. It is no wonder that everyday life is difficult and painful for them. God told us to have *self-control*, not *other-control*. We are responsible for *our* life, *not* for the life of others.

Responsibility

At this point, people may ask: ``Doesn't the Bible tell us that we are responsible for each other? Doesn't it say that we should carry each other's load? How, then, can we have boundaries?"

Let me say a few words about responsibility. Yes we have the responsibility to carry each others burdens. **Galatians 6:2** says

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

But this verse shows our responsibility *to* others, not a responsibility *for* them. It talks about burdens, huge loads that are so heavy for others that they *cannot* carry them all by themselves. Helping them in the time of need is our responsibility *to* them - that is how we show our love for them.

But only three verses later, in **Galatians 6:5**, the Word of God says that *each one should carry his own load.* That means we have to carry what belongs to us. That is what we are responsible *for*. Notice the difference between *burden* and *load*. A load is what we have to deal with on a daily basis, something that we can handle, even if this requires some effort - like a backpack that we take on a hike. No one should carry it for us. We have to take ownership of our everyday life and we are responsible for carrying the loads that come with it.

Problems arise, when people act as if their burdens are something they can carry alone and refuse help, or as if their daily loads were too heavy for them and something they shouldn't have to carry - or, conversely, if we refuse to help others in need or if we take away from others the load that they should carry themselves.[1]The results of these actions are either constant pain or chronic irresponsibility. If we want to avoid this for ourselves, we need to determine where our responsibility begins, and where it ends.

Fences with a Gate: Protection -- Good in, Bad out

Boundaries do not only help us avoid pain or irresponsibility. They are also important for guarding and nurturing the soul that God entrusted us. They are like fences with a gate. You can control what comes in and what goes out. This is very important, because within us are many things that are very damaging to us

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man. ***(Mark 7:21-23)***

These are the things that must leave our property and we need the ability to let them go so that they cannot poison us anymore. If we find pain or sin within us we need to open up and communicate our innermost to God, so that he can heal and forgive us. But we must keep the gate shut closely when evil is present or if sin wants to *enter* our life in order to protect the good that is inside. **Genesis 4:7** says

If you do not what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.

On the other hand, we need to be able to let our guards down when the danger is gone and open up for the good things outside. In **Revelation 3:20** Jesus says

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

Other people may have good things to give to us as well and we need to open up to them.

So boundaries are not walls but they are no open range either. If we want to grow, we need to control what goes in and what goes out. But if we lack boundaries, we allow many bad things to enter our life and good things to be destroyed by them. We will be tossed around by the waves created by the world around us and experience a lot of problems, fears, and helplessness in our struggle against sin.

He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls. ***(Proverbs 25:28)***

If we don't learn to take control of our life by protecting our boundaries, we are a fair game for the devil. We can't lose our salvation - but we won't grow either.
On the other hand, if our boundaries become walls, if we close ourselves off, then we hold the bad and painful inside and keep the good out. People who have suffered from abuse have a tendency to do that and they need to learn to open up in the right way.

Created in the Image of God

The concept of boundaries is also deeply embedded in God's person. God defines himself as distinct being, separate from his creation and from us. He clearly says what he is and what he is not. For instance, God is love **(1. John 4:16)** and not darkness **(1. John 1:6)**. He cannot tolerate sin but invites people, who love him, into his kingdom.

When God made us in his likeness, he gave us responsibilities within limits. He expects is to rule over the earth and to be responsible stewards over what he has entrusted to us **(Genesis 1:28)**. On the other hand, God respects the boundaries of our personality and does not interfere with them, because he wants us to be mature. He does not attempt to control our will or to run our life. He lets us make mistakes even when our bad choices hurt him. But he wants us to be free beings, free to choose between good and bad, because only in freedom we are able to develop a genuine love for God. If we were puppets who cannot choose
differently, what could our love mean to him?
God designed his entire creation for freedom. We were not meant to be enslaved by each other; we were meant to love each other freely. But when we turned away from God, we lost our freedom. We became enslaved to sin, to self-centeredness, to other people, to guilt, and to a whole host of other dynamics. But the Bible tells us to set boundaries against such types of other-control and to become free again. In **Galatians 5:1** we read

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

When we realize the freedom that we have gained through Jesus Christ, we will be able to develop relationships that are based on love instead of fear, manipulation, guilt, etc. Love can only exist, where there is freedom - both for us and the people around us. Boundaries help us define the freedom we have and the freedom we don't have.

Why are Boundaries important in Marriage?

Boundaries become particularly important in marriage, the closest of all human relationships. Love, freedom, responsibility, and protection are the cornerstones of a stable and growing relationship between man and woman.

Something incredible happens, when these ingredients work together. As love grows, spouses become more free from the things that enslave: self-centeredness, sinful patterns, past wounds, and other self-imposed limitations. As a result, they gain a greater sense of self-control and responsibility. Responsibility, again, increases love, and the cycle begins all over again. This is how marriage gets better and better as time goes on, instead of winding down after the excitement of the days of courtship changes into an everyday life together.

The key to all that is that both spouses take responsibility for their own issues instead of just reacting to the other, that they are not afraid of giving freedom to each other,

and that they love the other person even when he or she does not deserve it at the time.

But where there is no freedom, there will be slavery and, as a result, rebellion. And where there is no responsibility there will be selfishness and bondage. And where we do not take ownership for what is ours, we will get stuck at a certain level in our relationship and will not be able to go deeper.

Let me illustrate this a by a few examples.

Spouses, who refuse to take ownership for their own feelings and behavior often end up in endless and meaningless arguments about all kinds of unimportant things. The book *Boundaries in Marriage* describes such a situation quite vividly.

Caroline and Joe came in for marriage counseling saying that they could not stop arguing with one another. When I asked her, what the arguments were about, Caroline replied, ``He is just so angry all the time. He gets so mad at me that it really hurts.''

I turned to Joe and asked, ``Why do you get so mad?''.

Without having to think for a second, he replied, ``Because she always tries to control me and my life.''

``Why do you try to control him?''

``Because he is so into his own things that I can't get his time or attention.''

``Why don't you pay attention to her?''

``Because she is so nagging and controlling - I just have to get away from her.''

``Why do you nag him?''

``Because he won't do anything I want''

This went on and on and the two didn't even notice the absurdity of their answers. Whenever they were asked ``Why do you ...?", their *immediate* answer was always something about the other person. Neither of them ever took ownership of his or her behavior. In their minds, it was always ``caused" by the other person.

Blaming somebody else for our own behavior is a sign of great immaturity -- and I say this although I am painfully aware of the fact that I fall into that trap myself more often than I want to. On the surface, it seems that we can get rid of the responsibility for our actions by blaming somebody else. But in reality we're just denying ourselves the chance of getting help, because we don't want to admit to ourselves and others that

we failed. By putting the blame on our spouse, we hurt the person we love and who would be most willing to help us. But how can you help somebody who is not willing to accept ownership of the problem that needs to be solved?

If, however, we discover who is really responsible for what, we have an opportunity for change. If we learn to answer the question ``Why do you ...?'' with a ``Because *I* ...'', we will find out a lot about ourselves and the problems that are ours. That puts us in the driver's seat, because we will learn not just to *react* to our spouse, but to *act* lovingly *no matter what our partner is doing*. We may need to change some attitudes, behaviors, reactions, or choices - maybe even work on our feelings instead of having them control us.

We must *actively* participate in the resolution of whatever relational problem we might have, even if it is not our fault. Responsibility tells us that *we* are the ones who must work through our feelings. *Our* attitudes - not those of our spouse - cause us to feel distressed and helpless. How *we* behave and react is part of the problem. *We* allow ourselves to get pushed beyond certain limits and then become resentful. *We* are the ones who do not turn desires into accomplished goals or cannot let go of sick desires. And *we* - and only we - are the ones who have to initiate the change in *us*. Responsibility empowers us to experience growth in our marriage. But if we refuse it and wait for the other to change first, we will never see any progress.

Another problematic constellation in a marriage occurs if one partner has not become mature in a certain area of life and the other feels obliged to always rescue him or her. Typical examples for this situation are an overspending wife or a husband who doesn't want to help with the housework. The spouse of such a person usually goes through a lot of trouble keeping the family out of debt or the house clean and - as a result - feels severely restricted in his freedom and eventually becomes resentful. The situation is similar with a husband who doesn't want to help with the housework

The problem here is not just the immaturity of one spouse, but also the fact that the other one *allows himself* to become a victim of such a behavior actually enables it out of fear that setting limits would endanger the relationship. However, while setting limits might cause a temporary stir that we have to endure, the lack of freedom that we experience from *not* setting limits will prevent our relationship from going deeper.

Finally, there is the aspect of protection. Boundaries shall guard the good and not let evil destroy it. Sadly enough, in some marriages - even in Christian ones - the protective boundaries have to be raised against your own spouse because of an abusive situation. If the abused spouse takes on the role of the silent sufferer and waits for a miraculous change in the other one, the situation will usually get worse, as love grows colder and colder. If you want to save such a marriage, you can't allow your spouse to abuse you. If he does not experience the consequences of his behavior, the chances for a change are very slim. I am not talking about a divorce here - that is not an option - but about firm limits that protect yourself, your children, and ultimately your marriage from a destructive cycle.

In **1. Corinthians 5:3-6** Paul gives a similar recommendation for dealing with a man who refuses to let go of a severe sin:

For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?

Letting the sinner experience the full consequences of his sin may be the last chance to save him. If you stop enabling him, he may wake up, realize what he is doing, and eventually repent. This is what true love is - tough love in this case - because you do what is best for him and not what he likes. I know that it is very difficult to find the appropriate measure and you shouldn't attempt this without a lot of prayer and counseling. But if you do set limits, the chances for saving your marriage and rekindling the first love are much higher than if you don't.

Responsibility, freedom, and protection are necessary for a stable and growing relationship. Love can only exist where these ingredients are operating. But where love can grow, it creates more freedom that leads to more responsibility, which in turn leads to more and more ability to love and a much deeper relationship.

What is within the Boundaries?

So far we have discussed the nature of boundaries and their role in developing healthy relationships. However, in order to be able to take ownership for what is is ours, we must identify what is within our boundaries. What are the things for which only we are responsible? What is it that only we can control and protect?

Feelings
have gotten a bad reputation in the Christian world. They have been called anything from unimportant to fleshly, because feelings so often turn out to be a stumbling block in our walk with God. Sometimes the cause us to do some very stupid things that we would never have done in a clear mind.

But feelings can also motivate us to do good where common sense might have kept us from doing so. The Good Samaritan's compassion, as described in **Luke 10:33**, moved him to help the injured Israelite. The prodigal son's father was filled with compassion for his lost son **(Luke 15:20)**. Jesus so often was filled with compassion for the people around him **Matthew 9:36, 15:32**.

Feelings come from our heart and tell us something about the state of our relationships. Positive feelings indicate that things probably go well, negative ones - like anger, depression, or hurt - show us that there is a problem that must be addressed. Feelings should never be ignored - nor should they be allowed to have

control over us. Instead, *we are responsible for our feelings*. They are our problem, not that of others, and we have to find the answer to whatever they are pointing to.

Attitudes and Beliefs.
Attitudes have to do with our orientation towards life, God, relationship, other people, work etc., while beliefs are what we accept as truth. We develop attitudes and beliefs at a very early stage in our life and and often fail to question them when we grow up. As a result, both our attitudes and beliefs can be the source of great discomfort in our life, because we *hold the tradition of man* **(Mark 7:8)** instead of the commandments of God **(Matthew 15:3)**.

Many people with attitude problems believe that it is wrong to hold people responsible for their feelings, choices, and behaviors (God's view is expressed in **Proverbs 13:18,24**). Therefore they tend to blame others for the consequences of their own actions - an attitude that goes back to the very beginnings of mankind. In **Genesis 3:11-13** we read

And God said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat

But God doesn't listen to such lame excuses. He holds each person responsible for what he or she does - regardless of what others did. He punishes the serpent, Eve, and Adam. Listen to what he says in **Genesis 3:17**:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life

Yes Adam, I see that your wife gave you the fruit of the tree to eat - but the fact that she failed to obey my command is no excuse for what you did.

Our attitudes and convictions fall within *our* property line. We are the ones who will feel their effect and we are the only ones who can change them. Others may have influenced them, but the responsibility is ours.

Values
determine what we love and how important it is for us. They determine the priorities we have, for instance whether we value the approval of other people higher than the approval of God; or whether we value riches, power, and a pleasant life higher than spiritual values or relationships.

If we value things that have no lasting value, we will pursue many things that will not satisfy us but only give us a desire for more. We only want a little more of what we

desire, and believe that we will be content once we get it. But we will never get there, because our heart always asks for more.

Only when we take responsibility for our values and ask ourselves ``are these the values that I want to have'', we can realize the futility of such an attempt and confess that we have a heart that values the wrong things. Only then we are ready to receive help from God to ``create a new heart'' within us.

Thoughts.
Minds and thoughts are what distinguishes human beings from the rest of the creation. They make us able to accomplish great things, but can also be a source of pain and destruction. Therefore the Bible reminds us to *bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* **(2. Corinthians 10:5)**. Establishing boundaries for our thoughts involves three things.

- First of all have to *own our thoughts*, that is we must learn to develop our own thoughts instead of just reiterating what others say. Many people have not started their own thinking process even at the age of 50. They swallow other's opinions and reasonings without questioning at all what is being said, particularly when it is written in a newspaper, said on TV, or preached from the pulpit. Certainly we need to listen to the thoughts of others and weigh them, but we must not give our minds to somebody else. How many people have been led astray by political leaders, tabloids, TV shows, and - sadly enough - fallen preachers just because they were too lazy to detect the obvious flaws in what they had been told?
- *We must grow in knowledge*, particularly in the knowledge of God and his word. Most of us understand the need for learning when it comes to our professional life. But it even more important when it comes to life as such. Only when we continue to learn about God from his Word and by what we observe in his world, will be be able to use our minds responsibly, and make decisions that we won't regret later. Paul says in **1. Corinthians 13:11**:

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

- We also must *clarify distorted thinking*. We all have a tendency to think and perceive certain things in distorted ways, especially when it comes to relationships. Our perception of other people are distorted by past relationships and our own preconceptions of *who we think* they are. We cannot see them clearly because of the logs in *our* eyes, and often suspect bad things that are simply not there. In **(Matthew 7:3-5)** Jesus gives us a warning:

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

> Taking ownership of our minds and thoughts means checking out whether we may be wrong, instead of believing that we are always right in our judgment of other people. As we gather new information our thinking adapts and grows closer to reality.

Taking ownership of our thoughts also means that we are responsible for communicating them to others. Some people believe that their spouses should be able to read their minds and know what they want. But this only leads to frustration. I have never ever met a person who can truly read the mind of anybody else. The Bible clearly says that this is impossible.

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? ***(1. Corinthians 2:11)***.

Your thoughts are your own. If you expect your husband or wife to know them, you have to tell them.

Behaviors

have consequences. *Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap* **(Galatians 6:7-8**). This is not a threat but a ``natural'' law. If we study, we will learn a lot. If we go to work, we will get paid. If we act lovingly, we will have closer relationships. On the negative side, we can expect failure, poverty, or a lot of problems as consequences of irresponsibility, idleness or lack of self-control. *Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path* **(Proverbs 15:10)**.

The problem is, that people have always tried to break out of this natural law of sowing and reaping. And apparently some succeeded in doing so. But this can only happen if someone interrupts the law in another's life. A lazy, selfish, or pleasure-seeking person *should* experience the consequences of his behavior. But parents often protect their children from actually reaping these consequences. As adults, these children will have severe problems taking control of their life. They do not understand that their problems are just the natural consequences of their behavior and not caused by some bad luck or by people who ``don't like them''.

We must learn to accept the responsibility for our behavior. No one else can control it, but we can.

Choices,

like behaviors, are entirely under our control. We are the ones who make them and we are the ones who have to bear the consequences. Throughout the Bible we are reminded of the fact that we are responsible for the choices we make **(Deuteronomy 30:19, Joshua 24:15)**. But often we don't like to accept the consequences of our choices. In **Matthew 20:13**, for instance, a worker gets angry about receiving only the wage for which he had agreed to work, because others apparently had gotten a better deal.

In today's life, we often try to disown our choice by saying ``I had to'' or ``I cannot'', instead of honestly stating ``I decided to'' or ``I do not want''. We try to push the responsibility for our choices to somebody else or to the circumstances. As a result, we often feel pressed into making decisions that we don't like. God doesn't want that. In **2. Corinthians 9:7** Paul writes

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

It may be easier to follow the trend or the people around us, just because we won't stand out so much then. But this will certainly not give us the fulfilled life we desire. Whether we feel it or not, we have to realize that *we* are in control of our choices. If we do so, we will make fewer decisions that we will later regret, and more choices that we will be happy with on the long run.

Limits
are commonly misunderstood as *setting limits on others*. In reality, this is not possible. We can't set limits on other people because we lack the power to do make them behave ``right''.

We can and have to, however, set limits on our own exposure to other people.[2] This is necessary both for our own protection against evil influences and for the protection of our own freedom. Our model is God. He doesn't use his power to make us ``behave'', but he certainly separates himself from sinful people. As long as they don't repent, there is no space for them in heaven. Scripture tells us to do the same, that is to limit our exposure to sinful people. In **Matthew 18:15-17** we read

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

In the same way Paul writes in **1. Corinthians 5:11**

But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.

and in **2. Corinthians 6:17**

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.

Separation doesn't mean we consider ourselves to be ``above" these people or that we don't even talk to them anymore. But it does limit their influence on us.

In the same way, we need to *set proper limits on ourselves* to protect ourselves from being controlled by desires, feelings, impulsive reactions etc, without having to suppress these entirely. We need spaces inside ourselves where feelings, desires, impulses, etc. can exist freely. But we must limit the extent to which we are acting them out. Most people in this country have severe difficulties with that and therefore fall into one or the other extreme. Worldly people tend to give in to their feelings and desires too quickly, Christians tend to suppress them completely - both does not lead to a healthy, balanced life. What we need is *self-control without repression* and we are the only ones who can make that happen.

Talents.
No passage illustrates the need for a responsible use of our talents better than
Matthew 25:22-28

He also that had received two talents came and said,Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them.His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

Our talents are clearly within our boundaries. Yet, taking ownership of them is often frightening and sometimes risky. Nevertheless, God holds us accountable for what we do with them. Are we exercising our gift and being productive - or do we hide our talents because we fear failure? God wants us to *use* our talents. If we do not confront our fear of failure and practice, learn, and try the best we can, we insult the one who gave us our talents, that is God.

However, we have to use our gifts wisely. There is no use in trying to accomplish things that God didn't intend us to do. Don't take on *any* task just to make sure that you will not be called ``lazy" - because then you will surely miss out on the things that God really wanted you to do. It is a question of proper balance.

Desires.
Each of us has different wishes, dreams, goals and plans that aim at satisfying some desire in us. Yet we observe that only few people around us are truly satisfied. This is partly due to the fact that we can't define what desire we are trying to please with what we do and therefore direct our attention to what seems most obvious. James describes this problem in **James 4:2-3**

Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

We confuse pleasures and lust with desires and needs that fulfill us and spend a lot of energy on pursuing things that we don't really need and don't give us true satisfaction.

God is truly interested in our desires. He has made them and *He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him* **(Psalm 145:19)**.[3]God gives generously, but like any wise parent, he wants to make sure that his gifts are right for us. He doesn't give us something that only feeds our pride or enhances our ego. But if we ask for what is good for us, he is very interested (see **Matthew 7:7-10**).

We are responsible for our desires. We need to find out what our desires are and what really satisfies us. These desires are our own and probably very different from those of others. We need to pursue *these* desires and distinguish them from what what does not satisfy us. **Proverbs 13:19** says:

A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.

If we want to find fulfillment in life, we can't wait for others to bring that to us - we have to work on it ourselves.
Spiritual Needs
are one particular form of desires. When we take a close look into our soul we will find a deep desire for spirituality, that is a close contact with God. A close walk with God is not our duty, but a desire that needs to be filled, lest we want to experience emptiness in our soul. Sadly enough, however, many of us we will also discover that we neglect this need and take care of other, less important things that seem to be more urgent.

Filling our spiritual need is our own responsibility. Nobody else can do that for us - not our pastor, not our Sunday School teacher, and not even our spouse. These people may be able to give us advice and assistance, but in the end our relationship with God depends solely on us. We are the ones who need to find time for communicating with God in a way that we actually enjoy.

Love.
Our ability to give and receive love is the very center of our being. But many people have difficulty giving or accepting love because of hurt and fear. Their heart is closed to others and inside is a lot of emptiness and loneliness.

The bible tells us to *love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind* and to *love our neighbor as ourselves*. Our heart needs an *inflow as well as an outflow of love*. If we haven't exercised this, we feel weak in the same way our body would feel weak due to a lack of physical exercise. We need to take responsibility for our heart and train it to give love and to respond to the love that others desire to give us. If we don't, we will feel terribly lonely even in the most loving environment.

Our body
is obviously within our boundaries as well. It defines the physical part of our person, the one that we most obviously own. But, according to **1. Corinthians 6:19** it is also the temple of the Holy Spirit, and be used for glorifying God. Therefore, it is our responsibility to take care of our body. Apart from making sure that it will not be defiled by sexual sins, we also have to keep it healthy and in shape, instead of neglecting or mistreating it.

This means, for instance, that we should eat properly - make sure that we give our body the nutrition it needs and not just junk food. Yes, we have the right to enjoy all the good things that God provided for our body on this earth, but we shouldn't eat, drink, or smoke substances that are damaging to your body. And in particular, we should not overfeed it. In this country, where 55% of the population is overweight and 1/4 of all adults are considered obese, we have to be especially aware of the seduction of food and physical laziness.

So we should make sure that our body gets proper exercise. It will be thankful for that 20 years later. But on the other hand we must not abuse our body by putting unreasonable loads on it. A man of 150 pounds may be able to lift 200 pounds regularly for whatever purpose when he is young, but trying the same at the age of 40 may create lasting damages.

Also, we shouldn't use pain relievers on a regular basis without seeing a doctor. Pain is usually an indicator that something is wrong. If we suppress these warning signals and keep on with unhealthy habits, we may seriously damage our health.

We could go on and on. Usually common sense will tell us what is beneficial for our body and what is not. But the demands of today's society often create situations where we act against our common sense.

God may not have given you the same healthy, strong body as others. But if you take care of what you do have, you will be able to enjoy it much better.

For all the above areas we need to take responsibility if we want to have a balanced and healthy life. They lie within *our* boundaries and, apart from giving us some help, nobody else can take care of them. Taking care of what is inside our boundaries is not easy. In fact, setting and maintaining boundaries is hard work. But it is a type of work that leads to spiritual growth, deeper relationships, and a much more satisfied life.

Examples of Boundaries

How then, do we protect our invisible property lines? What are the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual means we can use to set boundaries and exercise limits? Let us look at a few examples.

Skin.
The most obvious boundary of our person is our physical skin. It is the first boundary we experience that separates us from others. It protects bones, muscles, blood, etc. and holds it together while keeping germs outside. Nevertheless, it has openings to let the good - that is food, drink, light, etc. inside.
A violation of our physical boundary is what we experience strongest. Victims of physical abuse often have lost their sense for boundaries. They are especially vulnerable because their property has been invaded early in life, and they don't know what proper boundaries are.
Words
are the clearest way in which you can communicate your invisible boundaries to other people. The most basic boundary-setting word is *no*, a word that children should learn at an early stage in their life. It lets other know that you exist apart from them and that you are in control of yourself. In **Matthew 5:37** and **James 5:12** God explicitly tells us to make use of this boundary.

No is a confrontational word, which makes it difficult for some people to use. They fear that confrontations will endanger their relationship with other people and rather give in to the control or demands of others. But the Bible says that we should confront the people we love and tell them ``This behavior is not okay and I will not participate in that." Many passages, like **Matthew 18:15-17**, urge us to say no to other's sinful treatment of us. Complying with what is going on ``for the sake of peace" is just the opposite of love. If we desire a healthy relationship with our spouse, we have to learn to *use* boundary-setting words and to *accept* them as well. Do we actually do that?

However, we also have to let other people know, where we stand and, what we believe, what we like, and what we want. If we don't use words to define our property, other people will find it difficult to know who we are and what we like and dislike. Don't expect that they see this without you telling them.

Truth.
Knowing the truth about the world around you and living according to it is essential for a healthy life. After several fruitless attempts to overcome the law of gravity, you will accept it as unchangeable reality and do not expect to float in the air when you fall of a mountain cliff - so you pay attention where you walk. In the same way, realizing the truth of God's unchangeable reality helps you to define yourself in relation to him.

When you read that and that *a man reaps what he sows* **(Galatians 6:7)** you can either accept that and consider the consequences of your plans and actions, or try to go your own way and get injured. When you read that you

- shall not lie
- shall not commit adultery
- shall not covet

- should give to others
- should love one another
- should be compassionate
- should not judge others but forgive

you may live by theses truths and experience growth in your relationships, or ignore them and fail. Many people have tried to live outside their God-given boundaries, not accepting who they are, and live tumultuous, peaceless lives. Living in truth, however, provides a great deal of safety.

In addition to accepting God's truth, it is necessary to be honest and truthful about ourselves. Otherwise we give others a false impression of who we are and how their actions affect us. For instance, if a wife gets hurt by her husband's behavior and she acts happy and loving, he will not find out that he did something wrong and that in reality she is feeling miserable inside. Her insincerity causes more damage to the marriage than his behavior. Paul writes in **Ephesians 4:25**

Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.

If we're not truthful with each other, our real relationship will go into hiding. On the surface, everything will appear to be fine, but intimacy is lost, and so is love.

Have you ever become aware of giving your spouse a false impression of your feelings or your perspective on the relationship? If so, you should ask yourself *why* you chose to do so and whether the long-term consequences were actually beneficial for your marriage.

Physical Distance.
Another boundary is best expressed by a small riddle:

When an accident happens - what is better than presence of mind?

Absence of body, is the surprising answer, but it is obviously true. Sometimes the best way to protect yourself is physically removing yourselves from a dangerous situation. It helps you stay out of trouble if you're not together with friends who could seduce you to do some pretty stupid things, or protects you from being abused. **Proverbs 27:12** says

A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished.

In a marriage, physical distance helps you to remove yourself from an argument in order to cool down, recover your senses, and to sort things out before you get together again. But make sure that the latter actually happens, since otherwise the physical distance may lead to a separation between you and your spouse.

Getting away from others also gives you an opportunity to replenish yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually after you have given to your limit. Jesus often went into solitude for that reason and from time to time we need to do the same - both as individuals and as couples.

Married couples, in particular parents need times where they are just by themselves - without children, family members, or friends - to build up their relationship, sort out mistakes from the past, and create new ways relating to each other. **Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5-7** says

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

Life doesn't always stay the same. Occasionally, we just need to take some time off to regain ownership over some aspect of our life and to consider whether some of our ways need to be changed or at least be adjusted.

Emotional Distance

is a boundary that should be used with some care. It is a temporary boundary that shall give your heart the space it needs to be safe in certain situations. *Never ever should it become a permanent way of living.* People who have been in abusive relationships or whose trust has been broken severely may need to guard their hearts until the problem has been worked out. **Proverbs 4:23** says

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

You should not continue to set yourself up for hurt and disappointment by blindly trusting a spouse who has repeatedly broken your trust. That doesn't mean you shouldn't forgive, but you may have to say things like

- *I love you, but I don't trust you. I can't be close until we work this out.*
- *We can be close again, when you can be kind to me.*
- *We can be close again, when you are serious about getting help.*

Emotional distance may be the most prudent thing until a situation is completely resolved because it prevents further hurt and disappointment. How many marriages, where one spouse had broken faith, could have been saved if the other one had kept an emotional distance and given her heart some time to heal?

Emotional distance, however, should not be confused with revenge. It must be a conscious, carefully weighed, and talked-about choice. Most of all it requires a pure heart to make sure that this boundary serves love and not some impure motives in us. Otherwise, it will only make the conflict worse instead of resolving it.

Consequences.
Trespassing on other people's property usually carries consequences. The Bible teaches this principle over and over: if we overstep God's boundaries, there will be consequences - one of the best known being **Romans 6:23**

For the wages of sin is death

Just as the Bible sets consequences for certain behaviors (cf. **Deuteronomy 30:15-20**), we need to back up our boundaries with consequences - otherwise people will find out that they can overstep them whenever they want to. In an ideal world, people would accept your boundaries without any threat of consequences. But parents are painfully aware of the fact that children usually do not accept boundaries if they are not ``enforced''. It is the very nature of children to test their limits and your seriousness about certain boundaries. And many adults are
not much better in that respect.

If you experience that your boundaries are not respected you need to announce consequences and - even more important - follow through with them. How many young adult lives could have been turned around if parents had followed through with their threat ``no more money if you quit another job without further employment''. How many marriages could have been saved if one spouse had followed through with the threat ``if you don't stop drinking (or hitting me), I will leave you until you get some treatment!''. Sometimes the consequences appear severe, but they may be necessary if there is no other way to deal with a serious trespass. In **2. Thessalonians 3:10** Paul commands

if any would not work, neither should he eat.

God does not enable irresponsible behavior and we shouldn't do this either. Of course, the consequences for trespassing a boundary should be appropriate and never be a revenge for bad behavior. For instance, you may

- refuse to bail someone out of a jam because of perpetual irresponsibility, like not completing work on time,
- start eating dinner without your husband if he is late for the 1000th time,
- leave the room if a conversation turns to become abusive,
- cancel a joint credit card and have separate ones issued if your wife continues overspending -- and refuse to pay her credit card bills.

However, we have to keep in mind that consequences need to be announced in time to give the other a chance to change. This is what God had in mind with the city of Niniveh, when he announced its destruction in the book of **Jonah**. Because the people changed he did not have to follow through with his threat anymore. The purpose of a

consequence is to let people know the seriousness of the trespass, not to punish them. This teaches them that we are committed to live according to helpful values, which we will protect and guard.

Other People.
Trying to set boundaries all by ourselves is a difficult thing to do. In some situations we may need the support of others to set, and more importantly to maintain boundaries. This is particularly important when we face problems in our relationships. The fear of being alone and not having any love in our lives makes us accept hurtful patterns that destroy our love for our spouse. There are several ways in which others can help.

Friends can help us to resolve conflicts. Counselors and pastors can give us new input and teaching that helps us to work on difficult issues. In support groups we can find healing and strength. And in extreme cases third parties can offer us shelter and help us find to protect and support ourselves.

Most importantly, other people are there to let us know that we are not alone and that our spouse are not the only source of love in the world. However, we have to make sure that other people are helping and not adding to the problem by intruding into our relationship. The purpose of seeking other people is not to hide or run away from the conflict but to resolve it.

Common Boundary Myths

By now we should have understood that setting boundaries is important both for the development of individual persons and for growth in a relationship. Nevertheless, many Christians have severe difficulties with setting and maintaining boundaries, partially because they believe boundaries to be directed against all a Christian values and partially because they are afraid of the consequences. Therefore we have to deal with some common myths about boundaries, that sound so true but nevertheless have little to do with reality.

- **If I set boundaries, I am being selfish.**

  This objection against setting boundaries is raised by Christians who fear being considered as self-centered, interested only in their own concerns and not those of others. They rightly point out that we are to be loving people, concerned for the welfare of others. In fact, the love for one another is the number one hallmark of Christians, as pointed out in the Bible over and over again (**Matthew 19:19 & 22:19, Luke 10:27, John 13:35, Romans 13:10, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8**). Don't boundaries turn us away from that ideal toward self-centeredness?

  Quite the opposite is true. Appropriate boundaries actually make us able to care about others. In fact, people with highly developed limits are the most caring people in the world. How can this be?

  Basically it is because they experience that their own needs are taken care of, so they have plenty of energy to care about others.

We all have needs, desires, and wishes. *Selfishness* only looks at our own wishes and desires, but not at what we really *need*. As a consequence, we lose balance and our focus on healthy goals and our responsibility to love others. For instance, some may desperately need help with the fact that they are terrible listeners or that they cannot share their possessions. But they may not desire this. God is much more interested in meeting our needs than granting all our wishes.

But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. ***(Philippians 4:19)***

That doesn't mean our wishes are ``all bad''. God will meet many of them but they are certainly less important.

Nevertheless, although God takes care of our need, he expects our participation. It is our responsibility to ask, seek, and knock **(Matthew 7:7)**, before we can receive, find, and get doors opened. There will be little spiritual and emotional growth if we do not bring our needs before God and do everything we can to get these needs fulfilled. Taking care of our own life is *stewardship*, not selfishness, because because we properly manage this precious gift from God instead of neglecting it due to a lack of boundaries.

- **Boundaries are a sign of disobedience and unsubmissiveness.**

Quite a few Christians fear that setting and keeping limits is a signal of rebellion and disobedience. They believe that saying no to something good is an expression of an unresponsive heart, so they participate in almost every Church activity that comes along. But in fact, doing so has no genuine spiritual or emotional value. If we don't give freely and cheerfully but rather out of a sense of duty, our heart is not in it and this is not what God wants (recall **2. Corinthians 9:7**).

What do we achieve with complying outwardly while becoming resentful on the inside? What is the value of a half-hearted *yes* where we would love to say *no* but are afraid to do so? God is much more concerned with our heart than with our outward compliance.

For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings ***(Hosea 6:6)***

Outwardly saying *yes* when we really mean *no* is the same as lying. There will be no blessing on what we do then, because we do it half-hearted anyway. It is better not to do it at all.

Can boundaries be a sign of disobedience? They sure are, if we say no to good things for wrong and selfish reasons, and therefore we should always check

our motives for saying no. But a *lack* of boundaries is even worse, because it leads to dishonesty and resentment and ultimately to disobedience and rebellion.

- **Boundaries mean that I am angry.**

  When people begin setting boundaries, telling the truth, and taking responsibility for the first time, they often seem to be surrounded by an ``angry cloud''. As they become more sensitive to situations where boundaries are not respected, they discover that they have become touchy and easily offended and that confuses and frightens them. We may experience that as one of the early results of this study.

  So, do boundaries cause anger in us? Absolutely not. If we see it that way, we misunderstand our emotions, and anger specifically. Emotions are signals that are supposed to tell us something. For instance, fear tells us to move away from danger, while anger urges us to confront a threat. A biblical example of how this feeling works is Jesus' rage at the defilement of the temple in **John 2:14-17**.

  Angry feelings serve as a warning system, telling us that we are in danger of being injured, controlled, or manipulated. That's why we get so angry at telemarketers. But that is not all. While fear tells us to withdraw (because it is better to do so), anger gives us the energy to move forward and protect what needs to protected.

  However, anger doesn't just disappear when the danger is over. It needs to be worked through appropriately. Otherwise it stays within us for years. It is the anger of years of nos that were never said, never respected, and never listened to, which surfaces when we first look at boundary violations that we never knew to exist before. We shouldn't be surprised if we detect this in ourselves and there is no reason to be frightened of these feelings.

  Of course, we shouldn't just let them out. Instead we should bring them to God so that we may be healed instead of keeping all that hostility buried in our souls. Only then can we begin to protect our treasures in a proper way, that is firmly but without negative emotions. The more biblical our boundaries become, the less anger will we experience. We don't need anger if we are in control of our life and values and see our needs met.

- **If I begin setting boundaries, I will be hurt by others.**

  Setting boundaries with people who don't like limitations is always complicated. Many people don't like it when we present different opinions and arguments. They may become angry at us and attack or withdraw from us. Even Jesus had to deal with that, for instance in **Matthew 19:16-22** when he had to let a rich young man go away, or during his permanent conflicts with the Pharisees.

Does that mean we should treat people softer just because they hate limits? Should we refrain from telling the truth and rather twist it a bit to make it easier to swallow? Is it more important for us that all people love us than living in truth? Jesus says in **Luke 6:26**:

Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets.

There are people in the world who love the truth and and accept limits, because they realize the chance for growth. But others resent differences, try to manipulate us into giving up our boundaries, and reject us if we don't. If we try to please all people, including those who hate boundaries, we will end up bending the truth. Jesus says in **Luke 6:27** that we should do good to those who hate us. But that does not mean we should do everything they want.

But what, if that boundary-hating person is our own spouse? Shall we comply just to keep the peace in our relationship? Or should we rather endure his or her bad temper and even risk that he or she walks out on us? We may have to risk that if we want our relationship to survive. If we give in all the time our relationship will become more and more shallow and distant. It is better to discover the true character of our spouse and take steps to fix the problem than to leave the problem unresolved.

Will we get hurt for setting boundaries? Very likely! But if our boundaries are being rooted in love **(Ephesians 3:18)**, there is a good chance that our relationship will eventually become much deeper and and closer than ever before.

- **If I set boundaries, I will hurt others.**

Occasionally setting boundaries will result in disappointing other people whom we value and like to see happy.

- A friend may want to borrow a car when we need it ourselves.
- People in church may call us for support when we are in bad shape ourselves and cannot help.
- A relative may be in a desperate financial situation but you can loan him anything without endangering your own family's security.

Shouldn't we help these people anyway? Don't we hurt others by setting boundaries? It depends on how we see boundaries. Do we view them as offensive weapon and setting boundaries as attacking and hurting people?

Nothing could be further from the truth. Boundaries are a defensive tool that prevent our treasures to be taken at the wrong time and for the wrong purpose. Saying no to others may cause them some discomfort, because they have to look elsewhere. But it does not cause injury.

It is not our responsibility to get the need of others met. We can and shall do so freely if we have the resources and don't enable irresponsibility. But we don't have the duty to take the daily load of everybody else. Even when someone has a valid problem, there may be times when we have to send them away because there are more important things that we need to take care of. Again, we should take Jesus as our example. Although he performed many miracles, he didn't heal everybody who was sick. He often withdrew from the crowd to be alone with the father (see, e.g. **Matthew 14:22-23**). In certain cases, we must allow others to take responsibility for their own loads and look elsewhere to get their needs met, or to deal with them themselves.

Obviously, we may also be the ones who get turned down. That is why we should develop several supportive relationships instead of having just God and one best friend. That allows our friends to be human, to be busy or unavailable at times, to have problems of their own, or just to have time alone. They don't become enslaved by us, if know that we can go to someone else.

- **Boundaries are difficult to accept**

Some people have difficulties with setting boundaries because of bad experiences with boundaries that were set on them. Having to accept the boundaries of others is certainly not pleasant, because no one really enjoys hearing the word no. But why is it sometimes such a big problem to accept boundaries?

- We may have been *injured by inappropriate boundaries in the past*, particularly during childhood. The younger a child, the fewer places it has to go to get its emotional and psychological needs met. Parents who ignore these needs and say no at the wrong times for the wrong reasons can create in their children a deep sense of being unwanted, which will follow them into adulthood and surface every time they hear the word no.
  Raising emotionally healthy and balanced children is not easy because we can create a lot of damage both by lacking boundaries or by setting them wrongly. We will all fail our children to a certain extent, and probably all of us have already discovered where our parents failed us. But the good news is that the past injuries don't have to stay within us. We can bring them to God and he will heal us.
- People who have been hurt by inappropriate childhood boundaries often tend to disown the bad feeling and *project* it onto others. Sensing their own pain in others, they will avoid setting limits on others, as they imagine how devastating it would be to them. Little do they know what really causes pain in others because they never doubt that other's

feelings could be different from their own.
We should never project our own feelings onto our children or assume that we know exactly how our spouse feels. It is an insult to their individuality. Regardless how well we know them, they are still different from us.

- An inability to receive somebody else's boundary, particularly in a marriage, may also have to do with an *idolatrous relationship to your spouse*. If your emotional well-being depends solely on his or her being there for you at all times, then something in this relationship is severely out of balance.
  Although we certainly need each other, no one but God is indispensable. If we consider one significant person to be responsible for giving us everything we need, if we view him or her as the only source of good in the world and fall into despair whenever there is a conflict with that person, then we put him or her on a throne that should only be occupied by God.

  We should never do that, because it hurts our spiritual and emotional freedom and development. Essentially you have given the control of your life and the responsibility for it to your spouse. Just imagine that person would die tonight in a car accident - where would you go? It is your responsibility to develop more than just one deep, significant relationship and give your spouse the freedom to say no to you without guilt.

- Finally, an inability to accept boundaries may indicate a *problem in taking responsibility.* Sometimes people become so accustomed to others rescuing them from whatever problem they fall in, that they actually believe that the responsibility for their own well-being is somebody else's problem. Thus they feel let down and unloved, when they are not bailed out.

Can we be hurt by somebody else setting boundaries on us? This is certainly possible, but not necessarily bad, if it helps us to grow by correcting something that needs to be fixed. In **2. Corinthians 7:8-9** Paul writes

For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.

Apparently the Corinthians accepted and responded well to boundaries that caused pain for them, because they knew them to be beneficial.

- **Boundaries cause feelings of guilt.**

One of the major obstacles to setting boundaries with others in our lives is our feeling of obligation. Don't we owe a lot to our parents and anyone else who has been loving towards us? So how can we ever say no to them when they are in need? Don't we then abuse their generosity?

Saying no to someone who has been kind to us is difficult, because it stirs up feelings of guilt. We feel that *because we have received something we now owe something.* Nothing could be more wrong than that. If we receive something as gift - love, money, efforts, or time - we should accept it as what it is: a gift with no obligations. All that is really needed is gratitude for something that was provided out of love. Period!

But many people have their difficulties with free gifts. They believe that they always have to give something in return. And so they never leave home, never switch jobs or friends, and never change churches even when it would be an otherwise mature move. In extreme cases people don't even want to accept gifts anymore because they don't have the time or money for a return gift. This is really twisted thinking. Free gifts are to be accepted with thankfulness, not with a feeling of debt.

Actually, the commercial world uses the fact that so many people have difficulties to accept free gifts as part of a marketing strategy. They first offer you something for free and after you have taken it, they ask you to buy their products. And we fall into that trap because the person who gave us that gift ``went through so many efforts''. Is that our problem? The gift was free and we have no obligation whatsoever for taking it.

Of course, there are always people who do not give selflessly but only for the purpose of getting something from us. You can always tell the difference by how they react to your sincere thanks. If the giver is hurt or angered, then the gift was not intended to be a gift but a loan or investment. If the gratitude is enough, you probably received a gift with no strings attached.

In **Revelation 2** God does an instructive job of keeping the issues of gratitude and boundaries separate. In the letters to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira he begins by praising their accomplishments, then tells that that nevertheless he has something against them, and finally confronts their irresponsibilities. He doesn't allow his boundaries to be nullified by his gratitude and neither should we.

- **Boundaries separate me from others.**

Some people have difficulties setting boundaries because they are afraid of being *different* from others or even becoming a social ``outcast''. Thus they avoid everything that makes them appear separate from others.

Although ``going with the crowd'' appears to make life easier it also makes us give up our individuality. But that is not the way God designed us. He has put

a lot of work into each of us (**Psalms 139:14**). He has given us a free will and the responsibility to make the choices that determine our life ourselves. God does not want us to become mere puppets of somebody else or to become undistinguishable from the environment. This becomes quite obvious in **2. Corinthians 6:14-18**, where Paul talks about our relation to unbelievers.

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

There are clearly situations where we have to be different from others even if that means that our distinguishing features become quite visible. In **Matthew 5:13-16** Jesus challenges us to accept our role as *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*. We can't go into hiding by ``blending in".

Do boundaries make us different? They sure do. But most people will eventually respect and even appreciate that you take a stand on things instead of being undistinguishable from everybody else.

- **Boundaries are permanent and result in burning my bridges.**

  Many people fear that a boundary once set cannot be removed anymore and thus creates a permanent gap between them and others. So they are afraid of losing friends by creating boundaries.

  But boundaries are set by us and completely under our control. We can and have to adjust our boundaries once we know that our property line will be respected. There are many biblical precedents for renegotiated boundaries. For instance, God chose not to destroy Niniveh when the city repented **(Jonah 3:10)**, and Paul requested Mark's companionship in **2. Timothy 4:11** although 2 years earlier he had refused to take him on his mission trip **(Acts 15:37-39)**, because at that time Mark had not been reliable enough.

  Boundaries do not prevent closeness. On the contrary, they lead to maturity and eventually to much closer relationships between us and others. We may experience that immature people temporarily become distant when we set boundaries. We may even lose some so-called friends who cannot accept boundaries. But these friendships wouldn't have been beneficial for us anyway.

All the above myths are genuine misconceptions. We may have learned from distorted teachings or developed them ourselves because of our fear of standing up and saying

no to unbiblical ``responsibility''. If we find ourselves ensnared and entangled by them, we should prayerfully review our value system, compare it to God's truth, and ask God to adjust it according to his will.

Boundary Problems

Boundaries, as we have seen, provide the freedom that we need for our spiritual growth and our ability to give and receive love. Most people, however, have problems with boundaries, because setting appropriate boundaries is not easy and respecting the boundaries of others is equally difficult. In this section we will study the main types of boundary problems and the reasons why people experience them.

Recall that the central function of boundaries is to protect our soul from bad influences while allowing it to be nurtured by what God provides for us. They shall keep the bad out and let the good in. They enable us to say ``*no*'' to the things that are not beneficial for us and to accept what is good for us. There are four possible types of problems that people can have with boundaries, illustrated by the following table.

Difficulty	Saying	Accepting
No	Compliant	Controller
Yes	Nonresponsive	Avoidant

- *Compliance* means saying ``yes'' to the bad.
  Compliants fail to set limits and will often feel guilty of controlled by others.
- *Avoidance* means saying ``no'' to the good.
  Avoidants fail to open their gate for the love and care of others.
- *Other-Control* is failing to respect the ``no'' of others.
  Controllers violate the boundaries of others either aggressively or by manipulation.
- *Unresponsiveness* means failing to give love to others.
  Nonresponsives don't hear the needs of others and neglect their responsibility to give care and help.

Remember when we talked about loads and burdens. According to **Galatians 6:2** we are to help each other carrying the huge boulders that life occasionally throws at us. But **Galatians 6:5** reminds us to carry our daily loads ourselves. *Compliants* always find themselves carrying the daily loads of others because they can't say *no*, while *controllers* try to make others carry even their daily. In contrast to that *avoidants* attempt to shoulder even the heaviest burdens themselves because they have difficulty to say *yes* to help, while *nonresponsives* even refuse to help when the other's burden clearly becomes unbearable.

We will now look at these four types of problems in detail. One should, however, keep in mind that some people may have problems in several of these areas at once. People can be compliant, avoiding, and controlling at the same time.

Compliance

The most obvious type of boundary problems is the difficulty to say *no* to others. Children, in particular girls, often grow up in an environment that teaches them that saying *no* is bad and that giving in to the demands of others means avoiding conflicts. Of course, parents have to teach their children obedience and good manners. But often they neglect the fact that some day they will send their children into a world that contains much evil. Evil in the form of controlling and manipulative people and in the form of temptations.

To feel safe in such a world, children need to have the power to say things like ``*I disagree''*, ``*I will not''*, ``*Stop that''*, ``*This is wrong''*, ``*It hurts''*, or ``*I don't like it''*. Blocking a child's ability to say no even to its own parents will handicap that child for life, because as an adult it will still say yes to everything.

Christian women are probably the ones that are most strongly affected by this type of boundary conflict, because they were trained to be submissive and obedient and grow up feeling that in some sense they are inferior to men. Despite all the ``revolutions'' of the 20th century we still live in a patriarchal society that often twists our understanding of the Bible's teaching on the role of men and women. As a result, Christian women tend to say yes more often - even to unreasonable demands - and to accept even abusive situations as God-given and unchangeable.

This is not what God tells you to do. **Matthew 18:15-17** is pretty clear about this.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. ***(v.15)***

We are *not* to be silent about sin, even if we seem to be the only ones suffering under it. The Bibel tells us to confront the person who sins against us.

Why?

There are two reasons - one concerning the other person and one concering yourself. First of all, you may actually persuade the other person and make him turn away from his sin. And by this you will gain him back as friend. Secondly, you prevent yourself from becoming resentful. If you remain silent about a sin committed against you, you will harbour negative feelings - first against the other person, then about yourself. And if the sin repeats over and over again, you'll find out that you can't forgive anymore, because forgiveness without repentence is very difficult. Eventually, your negative feelings will begin to ``eat you up'' and affect your whole personality.

Proverbs 4:23 says that you have a responsibility to guard your own heart with all diligence. So *you* have to do something about the sin committed against you. And this begins by saying *no* to it.

What, however, should you do if this *no* is not respected? If we read on, we see that Jesus describes a clear path.

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

*And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. **(v.16-17)***

Every step aims at reconciliation, if that is possible. But if he refuses to listen, you have to take more explicit measures. Jesus does not say ``*if he does not listen, forget about it*". He says ``*treat him as if he were an unbeliever*" and that means keeping a certain amount of distance from him. This does not only protect you from his sinful influence, but also gives him a chance to come back to his senses. In **1. Corinthians 5:3-5** Paul describes the purpose of separating from a sinful brother, namely *that his spirit may be saved*. If we tolerate sin, there is little chance that the sinner will change.

Strangely enough our churches are quick to pass judgment on people living in sexual sin while they tolerate almost all other kinds of sin. But Jesus does not make that distinction. If a brother does not want to let go of sin - and the emphasis is on does not *want* - we are to separate ourselves from him.

Compliance, however, makes people melt into the demands and needs of others. Compliant people can't stand distinct from people who want something from them. They minimize their differences with others to avoid confrontations and out of fear that others may not think well of them if they are different. Compliants are like chameleons. You can never rely on them to stand out for a long time. After a while, it becomes hard to distinguish them from the environment.

But compliance does not only keep us from *refusing evil* in our lives. After a while we become used to it and eventually even fail to *recognize evil*. Many people who live in dangerous or abusive relationships also live in constant denial. They find excuses for their spouse's behavior or even blame the situation on themselves. Their spiritual and emotional radar is broken; their ability to guard their heart is almost gone. And so is their ability to protect themselves by saying *no*. This happens for a number of reasons.

- Fear of hurting the other's feelings
- Fear of abandonment and separateness
- Fear of punishment or someone else's anger

- Fear of being selfish or unspiritual
- Feeling of guilt

The last reason is often experienced by people with an overstrict, critical conscience. They condemn themselves (and sometimes others) for things God himself doesn't condemn them for. *Since their conscience is weak, it is defiled*, as Paul expresses it in **1. Corinthians 8:7**. Afraid to confront their unbiblical and critical inner ``parent'', they become unable to confront others by saying *no* because this would cause more guilt.

Compliance needs to be distinguished from *biblical* compassion. In **Hosea 6:6** and **Matthew 9:13** God desires from us *compassion, and not sacrifice*. Compassion comes *from the inside*. We decide to give of ourselves to others. In contrast to that compliance is only *on the outside*. Compliants take on too many responsibilities and accept too many bad things - not by choice, but because they are afraid.

Avoidance

Boundaries, as we have discussed a while ago, shall not only keep the bad out but they shall also let the good in that our soul and spirit so desperately need. But some people have problems with that. Their boundaries are like walls, originally intended as protection, but now so strong that they let nothing in at all - neither the bad nor the good. No one can reach inside. No one can touch.

Avoidants are unable to accept the love and care that others want to give them. When they are in need, they withdraw so as not to let others see their needs. Although they deeply desire somebody else to step in and rescue them they are unable to ask for help. Their wall is just too strong.

Christians are particularly good in masquerading this type of behavior with religious terminology. They say (to themselves and others): ``*My issues are nothing compared to what others deal with. It would be selfish to bother others with my little struggles. The Lord expects me to deal with them myself ...so let's not talk about them.*'' Of course, the problems we're dealing with may seem insignificant when others have to face cancer and heart surgery or have lost their jobs. But nevertheless, we do need the help and love of others even if we appear strong on the outside.

God designed our personal boundaries to have gates, so that we can enjoy safe and close relationships with Him as well as with other people. But as it is our responsibility to shut these gates in the presence of evil, it is our responsibility to open them in times of need. **Revelation 3:20** says

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

God doesn't overrun our boundaries. He expects us to open up. Yet, for avoidants,

opening to God and other people is almost impossible. They have developed a certain rigidity toward their God-given needs. Some view their problems and legitimate needs as something bad, selfish, or shameful.

Men in particular often completely ignore their emotional needs, because they want to maintain their self-image as strong and independent person. They claim to have all they need even if they feel a certain emptiness inside. After a while they get used to that and they don't even recognize anymore that they are in desperate need of help. The wall has become too strong to let anything in or out.

Our western society contributes a lot to this behavior. We can talk about everything except for what is going on inside *us*. We don't want to be seen as weak. And when others ask us ``*How are you?*" we do not dare to give an honest answer because we don't expect them to listen anyway - so we simply say ``*fine*" even if our heart is ready to break. And, unfortunately, the other's respect for our privacy has become so great that they do not ask further questions even if it is quite obvious to them that our ``*fine*" is far away from the truth.

Sometimes I wish, we wouldn't let each other get away with that.

Some people can be compliants and avoidants at the same time. They suffer from what could be called *reverse boundaries*. They have boundaries where they shouldn't have them and lack boundaries where they need them. They cannot say no to the demands of others but are unable to receive the support they so readily offer to others. They are stuck in a cycle of feeling drained, because they give themselves up for others. As a consequence they constantly lose energy and have nothing to replace it.

Other-Control

Setting appropriate boundaries is not easy. But it would be much easier if other people would respect them. But for some people our *no* is simply a challenge to change our mind. We all know them as salesmen and telemarketers, for whom a *no* means *maybe* and *maybe* means *yes*. While this may be productive in learning to sell a product, it can wreak havoc on a relationship.

Controllers have problems hearing and respecting other people's boundaries. They constantly violate these boundaries and are often viewed as bullies, manipulative and aggressive. The primary problem here is that these people resist taking responsibility for their own lives and try to give it to others instead. They use various means of control to make others carry the load intended by God to be their's alone by making it appear as a burden that needs to be shouldered by others as well. And because there are so many compliants in this world they always find somebody to pitch in for their irresponsibility.

Controllers come in two types: aggressive and manipulative controllers

- *Aggressive controllers* clearly do not listen to other people's boundaries. They simply ignore them and run over them like a tank. Most of the time they are not even aware that other do have boundaries. In their world there is just *no place for someone else's no*. Once they have set their minds on a way how life should be, they try to make the world fit into their ideas - as if there would be only one, the ``correct'' way to live. In this, they neglect their own responsibility to accept others as they are.

  These people have their good sides. They often accomplish what others wouldn't even dare to try. Sometimes you see them do astonishing things - just because they don't worry so much about what others think. But you also see them as religious fanatics or bosses who appear like slave drivers to their employees.

  One good example is Peter. He was the one who dared to stand up and say what he believed. He was the first to confess Jesus as the Christ, he was the one who dared to address the crowd at Pentecost - untrained as he was. But he also had a lot of problems accepting boundaries. Remember **John 13:6-10**, where Peter refused the Lord to wash his feet, or **Mark 8:31-33**, when Jesus talked about his upcoming death and resurrection. Peter actually rebuked the Lord for that, because he didn't want to accept what Jesus had said.

And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned about and looked on his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men.

  Of course, the Lord did not give in to what Peter had said. But he had to confront Peter's violation of his boundaries quite strongly.

  Aggressive controllers have character traits that we sometimes can only admire. But they also have a big problem. They need to learn that their way is not the only way and that others have a right to have different opinions - even if they are wrong. They must learn to accept what others are saying. If they want others to change, they have to convince them instead of running over them.

- *Manipulative controllers* are less honest than the aggressive ones. They do very well recognize the boundaries of others but try to persuade them to give up their boundaries. They talk you into a yes, seduce other into carrying their burdens, manipulate circumstances to get their way, or use guilt messages.

  A good example is Jacob who manipulated his brother into giving up his birthright (**Genesis 25:29-34**) and deceived his father into giving him the blessing that originally was reserved for Esau (**Genesis 27:1-29**). Over and

over he used his cleverness to circumvent other's boundaries - the name Jacob, the ``*deceiver*'' was well chosen for him. Jacob had to change before God could use him. That's why God wrestled with him in human from (**Genesis 32:24-32**) before he changed his name into *Israel*. With that day, Jacob's character changed as well and he became more honest about what he wanted.

Manipulative controllers deny their desire to control others. They say ``I have done nothing wrong'' and disown their self-centeredness. Only when they are confronted with their dishonesty, they can eventually take responsibility for it, repent of it, and learn to accept their and other's limits.

Controllers are usually *undisciplined* people. They have little ability to curb their impulses. Delaying gratification - whatever that may mean to them - is difficult for them and they are limited in their ability to take responsibility for their own lives. They expect others to do that and give them the gratification they desire. That is why they hate the word *no* from others.

Controllers are also isolated. That doesn't mean that they don't have many people around them. But they can never be sure whether these people stay with them out of fear, guilt, or dependency or whether they truly love them. They are afraid of being abandoned if they let go of they control or manipulation. And deep down inside they do not feel loved at all but very lonely. If they want to experience true love, they need to confront their fear and give up their control because *there is no fear in love; but perfect love drives out fear* (**1. John 4:18**).

Believe it or not, compliants and avoidants can also be controllers at the same time. However, because they can't say clearly where their boundaries are and what they want they tend to be more manipulative than aggressive. When they need emotional support from somebody else, for instance, they may do him a favor - expecting to receive love in return when they act lovingly. But that doesn't always work, especially if the other one can't read minds.

What is wrong here? Love is not self-seeking (**1. Corinthians 13:5**), so you should not give love only to receive love. If you try this, you are actually seeking indirect control over the other. You expect to get back what you invest instead of letting the other choose freely when and how to show his love to you. This may work occasionally, but most people feel betrayed, when they find out that your love has a price attached to it, and distance themselves from you because you are not truthful.

Unresponsiveness

Some people walk through the world seemingly indifferent about the needs of the people around them. They think that life is tough and that everybody needs to handle it by him- or herself. To the outside world, they often appear strong because they do not get distracted by the many things around them and usually accomplish what they have in mind. Many successful business people fall into this category, because in the business world you can seldomly afford to look left or right if you want to follow your grand vision.

But in relationships this lack of sensitivity makes people appear cold. They don't react to the needs of others - they don't even seem to hear them at all. And if others express their neediness to them, they shrug it off as if this need were only a tiny nuisance with which they shouldn't be bothered. For them, these needs are a distraction - nothing more - and they clearly do not want to deal with them.

Nonresponsives rightfully point out that they are not responsible *for* the life of others but fail to see that the do have a responsibility to connect to the people around them and to help them carry the heavy burdens that they cannot shoulder themselves. They do just the opposite of what God asks us to do in **Proverbs 3:27** and **Romans 12:18**

Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it.

If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

Both verses indicate the same idea: we *are* responsible to care about and help others whom God places in our lives - but only within certain limits. To refuse help when we do have the appropriate resources is equally wrong as feeling responsible for everything that happens around us.

There are two possible reasons for unresponsiveness. One is a *critical spirit* toward other's needs, which usually comes out of a projection of our hatred of our own incompleteness - a problem addressed by Jesus in **Matthew 7:1-5**. The other is being so much *absorbed by our own desires* that there is simply no space for the needs of others, which goes against what the Bible tells us in **Philippians 2:4**:

Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

Yes, we *are* to take care of ourselves. But this has a purpose, namely to enable us to help others without moving into a crisis ourselves.

Unresponsiveness is particularly problematic when combined with other-control. People who have a strong tendency towards both have a hard time looking past themselves. They expect others to shoulder their own burdens and to take care of them as well. And sadly enough, they often find a victim who is willing to put with this.

What happens if a controlling insensitive person meets a rescuing, sensitive enabler? Although they are like fire and ice, they will probably develop a relationship and may actually get married - because each of them fills the gaps of the other. The compliant avoidant needs somebody to take care of. That keeps her saying yes and out of touch with her own needs. And who is the ideal partner to take care of, if not the controlling

nonresponsive? On the other hand, the controlling nonresponsive needs someone to keep him away from his own responsibility - and who fits that role better than the compliant avoidant. Unfortunately, this relationship benefits neither of the two, because their true needs remain unfulfilled all the time.

Functional and Relational Boundaries

The above boundary problems had to do with the personalities of the people who tend to lack proper boundaries or to set unreasonable ones. A final problem comes from an inability to separate functional boundaries from relational ones.

Functional boundaries are to be set for a particular purpose. They refer to our ability to complete a task, purpose, or job and have to do with discipline, initiative, and planning. In contrast to that, *relational boundaries* need to be set for making a relationship grow. They refer to our ability to be truthful to others with whom we are in a relationship.

A good example of that distinction can be found in **Luke 10:38-42**, which describes how Mary and Martha relate to Jesus. When Martha complained about Mary not helping her, Jesus pointed out that Mary had chosen the better. That doesn't mean that what Martha did was bad. It just means that it was of *lesser value at this time* - and thus the wrong choice.

Many people have good functional boundaries but poor relational ones. They are great when it comes to performing tasks, but have difficulty telling a friend or a spouse that they don't appreciate his behavior. The reverse can also be true. Some people can be absolutely honest with others but have severe difficulties with being responsible at work or getting up in time.

How did we become that way?

Many of the boundary problems we experience in ourselves have to do with the way we grew up. We experience boundary violations, lack of boundaries in our parents, or that inappropriate boundaries were set against us. And we may either imitate this pattern or take overly strict measures to protect ourselves from getting hurt. Generally, the earlier and more severe the injury, the deeper the boundary problem. Let us look at a few examples.

- *Withdrawal from boundaries.*

  It is crucial that developing children have the right to disagree and experience that *their* boundaries will be honored as well. If their personality shall develop, they must be able to experiment - and that includes the freedom to refuse and confront. **Proverb 27:17** says

Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.

Of course, they need to know that certain behavioral lines should not be crossed, and they should be disciplined for ``misbehavior''. But never ever should parents *withdraw their love* when their children disagree with them - either in word or deed.

As God loves the sinner, but hates the sin, so should we treat our children. Otherwise they grow up believing that they are *not lovable when they don't behave*. They translate that into ``*When I am good, I am loved. When I disagree, I will be cut off*''. And as a consequence, they develop their compliant, loving, and sensitive parts and begin to fear or hate their truth-telling and separate parts.

- *Hostility against boundaries.*

A second boundary injury, easier to spot than the first one, is a parent's hostility against boundaries. Some parents become quite angry when their child disagrees with them and use angry words, physical punishment, or inappropriate consequences to express this anger. They send messages to their children like

- *If you disagree with me, I will ...*
- *You'll do it my way or else ...*
- *You need an attitude adjustment ...*
- *Don't you ever question me ...*

Of course, children need to be under the authority and control of their parents and need to be disciplined. But your approach should be ``you have a choice'' and not ``my way or else''. Although at a first glance these approaches aim at the same - namely consequences for irresponsibility, they are worlds apart. Discipline teaches them self-control - as expressed in **Hebrews 12:10-11**.

But punishment for growing independence only teaches them to search for ways how to avoid your wrath. They will learn how to hide their opinions under a compliant smile. And as adults they will very likely have problems in both saying and hearing *no*. Some will try to avoid confrontation at any cost. Others will follow the example of their parents and become controlling people who always want to have things done their way.

- *Overcontrol.*

Some parents try to protect their children from making any mistakes by setting overly strict rules and limits. They may prevent their kids from playing with other kids to protect them from learning bad habits. They may keep them out

of school to protect them from ``worldly influence''. They create a sterile, bacteria-free environment to prevent them from getting infected.

The problem with overcontrol is that it does not prepare the children for the real world. Just as the strict laws of the Pharisees in Jesus' time could not prevent the Jews from falling into sin, so can't too strict rules and limits prevent your children from making mistakes or getting hurt.

Why?

If you control every aspect of your children's life, you don't leave any room for them to make mistakes while they are with you. **Hebrews 5:14** says that it needs constant exercise to learn maturity and to discern good and evil. If they don't get exposed to what is in the world, they can't learn to choose the good in the presence of evil. If they grow up in a germ-free environment, they get sick the first time they travel into another region. It is no wonder that Americans catch all kinds of diseases on foreign travel while other nationals seem not to become affected at all.

Overcontrolled children become dependent on a particular environment. They will experience problems with taking risks and being creative, and thus have difficulties setting and keeping firm boundaries.

- *Lack of limits.*

The opposite of overcontrol and hostility, a lack of appropriate limits, has an equally devastating effect. Parents who confuse a loving relationship with their children with an absence of discipline, raise children with no sense of self-discipline or responsibility. Why should you develop responsibility if your parents always cover for you and tolerate everything you do as an ``innocent child''?

Discipline *is* necessary to help children develop character. A lack of discipline, coupled with a lack of connection, can produce an aggressive controller. Probably all of us have witnessed scenes in a supermarket where a 4-year old is in total control of a mother. The mother pleads and begs the child to stop having its tantrum and finally gives in to its demands - instead of disciplining it.

Now imagine the same scene with the child being replaced by a 40-year old adult. You won't be able to set limits on him or her now. And it is hard to get his or her attention for your needs. A lack of limits can create both controllers and unresponsiveness.

- *Inconsistent limits.*

Some parents have no proper vision about rearing children and therefore combine strict and lax limits. This totally confuses their children, because the messages they get are conflicting. The children cannot see any pattern in what their parents teach them, and do not know what the rules of family and life are.

Saying no might bring respect, or it might bring rage - they never know. As a result they become quite uncertain about what they are and are not responsible for. They are *like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind,* as **James 1:6** puts it.

The same effect may happen when parents don't really agree on the limits they set on their children. In that case children learn that it is o.k. to circumvent the limits set by one parent by going to the other. Girls may try wrap their father around their finger or bond together with the mother against the males in the family. Boys may get more attention from their mother, if she believes that they are treated harsher by the father than the girls, or from a father who is simply proud in his son. In any of these cases the message being received is that limits can be bypassed if you only find a weak spot. And the result is often a manipulative adult who searches for the person whose limits are weak enough to give in to her or his desires.

- *Hypocrisy.*

  Parents, who are only half-comitted Christians, often do not live for themselves what they teach to their children. They tell them that it is wrong to lie, but find it o.k. to cheat on their taxes. They expect total obedience and ``*to honor their father and mother*'' but show little respect to their own parents. They send them to church and don't go themselves. They put all kinds of rules on them but always find excuses for not keeping to traffic rules or other laws of our society.

  In **Matthew 23:27-28, 25, 14, 13** Jesus to a strong stand against any kind of hypocrisy:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer:

But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.

They try to appear good on the outside, but their children will easily see what is behind that mask. For them it seems that adults have a right to live such a double-minded life and that it is more important what people might think of

you than who and what you really are. And the result is what Jesus describes in **verse 15**:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

They become even worse than their parents. They see that boundaries are kept on the outside, but that you may break through them as it pleases you.

The above boundary injuries have much to do with our relationship to our parents and how we react to the way they raised us. There are, however, also other types of injuries

- *Traumata.*

  Traumatic events, particularly during early childhood, have a strong influence on the development of our soul. A trauma is an intense emotional experience, usually a painful one such as: emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; accidents or debilitating illnesses; the death of a parent, a divorce, or extreme poverty. These events shake two necessary foundations of a child's growth, namely that

  - The world is reasonably safe.
  - They have a certain amount of control over their lives.

  Children who feel that these foundations are shaky, feel insecure and are afraid that they have no say in any danger that approaches them. As adults, these people need the help and love of others, because they can't heal themselves. That is what Christian fellowship is made for. We need to show them that they are now in an environment where it is safe to let their guards down to receive the love they desperately need.

%3. *Our own character traits.*

  Some boundary problems certainly have to do with our character. If we are more active and willing to confront others, we run danger of becoming controllers. If we are rather quiet and reflective, we may shy away from boundaries or become avoidants. We need to develop a certain awareness for the tendencies we have.

%3. *Our own sinfulness.*

> The final reason for boundary problems is, of course, our own sinfulness. We were born imperfect and depraved. It is our very nature to resist humility and obedience to God, to refuse accepting our position, and to desire to be ``in charge'' - not needing anyone and not accountable to anyone. Some part of that nature lives on in us even after we're saved, and that prevents us from always being as responsible as we should be.

We can't change the past anymore. It is useless to blame our parents for what they did wrong in us or to blame God for traumatic events that we had to go through. But we have the ability to change our reaction to past boundary injuries - if we become more aware of it.

Ten Laws of Boundaries

Boundaries, as we pointed out over and over again, are essential for our ability to give and receive love, for spiritual growth, and for a healthy, balanced lifestyle. But often we find ourselves in situations where boundaries are violated and ask ourselves what to do about it.

Unfortunately, there are no fixed recipes for dealing with problematic situations, particularly when it comes to relationships and marriage. Common questions like ``*How do I handle my husband's lack of intimacy?*'' or ``*How can I keep my wife from overspending?*'' can only be answered in the context of each couple's particular situation. A husband may lack of intimacy because he has trust problems - or because he is self-absorbed. Or he may be perfectly normal and she just has unrealistic expectations. A wife who overspends may have problems structuring herself - or may live in denial of the problem - or may be perfectly normal but have a controlling husband. In each of these cases the solution is entirely different.

Nevertheless, there are some general guidelines that help us dealing with boundary problems. They are based on the fact that God set up this world with laws and principles that make life a bit more predictable. Like the laws of nature, these principles cannot be changed and we will do well understanding and observing them. Of course, we can always try live as if these laws would not exist, but this is as meaningful as trying to ignore the law of gravity or to build a perpetuum mobile - a machine that always runs without requiring energy from the outside. It simply doesn't work that way and any attempt to go against God's spiritual laws in this world is equally futile.

Understanding the laws of boundaries will take us beyond the problem-solving level in relationships. It will help us to structure our marriages such that we will detect and solve problems *before* they start to have their destructive effects on us. The good thing about these laws is that they do not talk about a hypothetical ideal marriage as it should be. They are about life *as it really is*. They are always in force, whether we are

aware of them or not, and we may actually be familiar with them to a certain extent. By spelling them out, we will better understand why certain aspects in our marriage are always problematic and why other aspects work astonishingly well.

In the following we will discuss 10 fundamental laws that tell us what we need to *do* or *consider* if we want our relationships with other people to grow. We will try to understand what the law is, what the positive effects of observing it are, what happens if we don't observe it, and in particular how they apply to our marriages.

The Law of Sowing and Reaping

The law of *cause and effect* is probably one of the most basic laws in life. It says that none of our actions do will be without consequences. Whatever we do will have inevitably an impact on our life and possibly on the life of others. The Bible calls this the law of *sowing and reaping*. **Galatians 6:7-8** says

...whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

What God tells us here is not a threat or an announcement of punishment for misbehavior. He just tells us how things are. If we ``sow to our own flesh'', that is if we are driven by our worldly desires and impulses - then we will reap the negative effects of that. If we overeat and don't exercise, we will later have to fight overweight, heart problems, and all other kinds of health problems. If we overspend, the interest on our debts and the constant struggle with our creditors will eat away the joy that we had when we bought all these nice things. If we drive drunk, under the influence of medicine, or exhausted from lack of sleep, the memories of the little child we ran over because we didn't react quickly enough will haunt us for decades - let alone the legal consequences. If we act selfish, unloving, and irresponsible, people will withdraw from us and begin to avoid us.

On the other hand, if we sow to the ``spirit'', that is consider the value of our actions, we will reap the benefits. People draw close to us when we do loving and responsible things and show that we care. If we eat right and exercise regularly, we have a better chance to stay healthy and fend off colds and similar diseases more easily. If we budget wisely, we will usually have enough money to pay our bills and maybe even enjoy a little extra.

Of course, your individual circumstances may impact the extent to which you see this law in action. Some people are simply not as healthy as others, even if they pay a lot of attention on what they eat and how they exercise. Some people are in financial trouble no matter how well they budget, because their finances were ruined by accidents and sickness. It would be quite unfair to judge them because of the problems they are in - we know from the book of Job how wrong such a judgment can be. But these special cases do not change the law of sowing and reaping: they would

be much worse off than they are now if they would ``sow to the flesh'' in addition to the problems they already have.

In the same way, we should not believe that the law of sowing and reaping is not in effect for some people who never seem to suffer the consequences of their actions. They get away with laziness, overspending, heavy smoking and drinking without experiencing any problems. Watching the *lifestyle of the rich and famous* or of some of the classmates of your children seems to indicate that the law of sowing and reaping holds for anybody else but not for them.

But **Galatians 6:7** explicitly warns us: *do not be deceived*! The law still holds - we just don't see the full picture. If you watch what happens to the rich and famous 10 years after all the world could see their excessive lifestyle, you notice that even they could not escape the consequences of their actions. And other people only escape the consequences of their irresponsibility because somebody else always steps in and bails them out.

Some people don't reap what they sow, because someone else steps in and reaps the consequences for them. Your parents may send you money to protect you from your creditors and thus bear the consequences for your spendthrift ways. You may walk on eggshells around your moody husband, try everything to make him happy, and enable him to have his tantrums as he likes while you bear the entire burden of his moodiness. Thus people may interrupt the effect of the law, just as one catches a glass that is falling off the table. Yet the law of gravity is not changed by that. And in the same way the law of sowing and reaping is not repealed if somebody interrupts its effect. The only thing that has changed is that *somebody else* bore the consequences.

Now there are situations where this has to be the case. Parents may step in to prevent children from a true disaster. Spouses rescue each other out of difficult situations because they love each other. Jesus bore the consequences for our sins on the cross because he loved us. But these are exceptions, not the rule.

Marriages, in particular, were designed to be a place not only of love, but also of growth. And by stepping in for your spouse, you enable her to continue in her immature ways without having to grow. If you truly love your spouse, you allow her to experience the effects of her irresponsibility. Refusing to rescue your husband - such as by refusing to cheer him up when he is pouting, to pay off his credit card bill, or to call in sick for him when he has been partying all night long - helps to keep the problem where it belongs, that is with him. And eventually (after some initial complaints) he will get the message and understand that *he* must change.

You can't achieve the same effect by confronting an irresponsible person. **Proverbs 9:8** tells us that it is worthless to confront irresponsible people.

Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.

It requires wisdom to accept rebuke. But people caught in patterns of irresponsible behavior are usually not wise when it comes to that particular point. To them, a

confrontation is just nagging. It is not *painful* enough to cause a change; only consequences are.

The law of sowing and reaping is more easily identifiable in the *functional* part of a marriage, because the tasks are more concrete: paying bills, cooking meals, keeping the house, etc. If you reap the discomfort of your spouse's careless housekeeping, this will be quite obvious. It is more tricky in the *relational* part, which involves the emotional tie between husband and wife: how deeply connected they are and how they feel about each other - positively and negatively. Wives often take the consequences for the moods of their husbands without even realizing that they actually enable these moods. Husbands may reap the consequences of a demanding wife sowing self-centeredness in the form of resentment, guilt, and loss of freedom without understanding where all this comes from.

But in either aspect the problem is the same: The person who created the problem doesn't have to face its effects and thus sees no reason to change it. The spouse who takes responsibility for dealing with the problem does not realize that this problem is not his problem and thus does not say or do anything about it.

But the spouse who carries the consequences is the only one who can change that. She can't change her spouse, but she can change the fact that she is the only one who facing the effects of his irresponsibility. By setting appropriate boundaries - which ranges from mentioning how much this behavior hurts her, all the way to setting a clear limit on (her exposure to) it - the law of sowing and reaping will be reestablished in the way it was intended to be and eventually lead to growth in the relationship.

The Law of Responsibility

A proper understanding of responsibility is vital for a growing relationship within a marriage. When we marry, we become responsible for loving our spouse deeply and for caring for him or her as for no one else. We care about how we affect our spouse and we care about her welfare and feelings. Our responsibility to our spouse is higher than our responsibility to any other person - and that includes our parents, our children, our friends, the people at church, our boss, and our colleagues at work. We are not married to these people but only to our spouse. **Genesis 2:24** is very clear about this:

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

In the same way we have certain responsibilities to other people. **Galatians 5:13-14** reminds us that we should use our freedom in Christ to develop genuine love for ``our neighbors''.

For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 5:43, 19:19, 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, James 2:8 say exactly the same and in **John 15:12** Jesus challenges us to love one another as he has loved us. Anytime we do *not* love others, we do not live up to our responsibilities.

But problems arise when our understanding of responsibility gets confused. We are to *love* one another, not *be* one another. We can't feel the feelings of our wives. We can's think the thoughts of our husbands. We can't behave for our children. We can't grow for others - only they can. Likewise others can't grow for us - only we can. We have to *continue to work out our own salvation ... for it is God who works in us to will and act according to his good purpose* (**Philippians 2:12-13**). No one can do that for us. We are responsible *for ourselves* ...and others are responsible for *themselves*.

In a marriage this means that we have to distinguish between *our responsibility to* our spouse and *her responsibility for* herself. This means we have to support each other in carrying the heavy burdens of life (**Galatians 6:2**) such as health problems, emotional crises, financial burdens, raising children, and the workload that is necessary to keep the family running. On the other hand we cannot take over the responsibility for our spouse's feelings, attitudes, values, and her handling of life's daily little difficulties. We may help each other, but each person must take care of his and her daily loads (**Galatians 6:5**).

Many people have a tendency to fall into one of the two following extremes. One the one hand, a husband may neglect his responsibility to love his wife and become selfish and inconsiderate. This is being irresponsible *to* her and violates what Jesus commands us in **Matthew 7:12**

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.

On the other hand, a husband may feel responsible for his wife's happiness and notice that she is unhappy because of the lifestyle they can afford and the daily duties she has to perform. So he tries everything to make her happy. But this is an impossible task. While a husband should be sympathetic towards his unhappy wife, he can't make her happy as long as she does not take on the responsibility for her feelings.

Finally, the law of responsibility also means that we have to refuse to rescue or enable immature or even sinful behavior. We are to *give to needs* but *put limits on sin*. We should never take on responsibility for a destructive and sinful behavior of our spouse, because that would only reinforce the sinful pattern. **Proverbs 19:19** warns us

A man of great wrath shall suffer punishment: for if thou deliver him, yet thou must do it again.

Instead of rescuing our spouses from the consequences of sin, we should do everything in our might to help them get out of that sin - even if that means strict limits that may appear very painful at first. **Proverbs 23:13-14** says:

Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.

For example, if your spouse has a problem with overspending, it is better to cancel credit cards and set up separate accounts than letting the debt pile up until both off you have to declare bankrupcy. No one has ever died from unfulfilled desire in a shopping mall. Or if your husband has a drinking problem and insists on driving even when he is drunk, it is better to call the police and have his license be taken away, than to let him drive anyway and kill another person in an accident.

Of course, the measures you take should be weighed carefully. But in some cases they may have to be quite severe to prevent a disaster.

The Law of Power

One of the most common questions in marriage counseling is ``*How do I get my spouse to* ...". This question indicates that there is a misunderstanding about what we can do and what we can't do, or to what extent we have the power to cause changes in our marriage. Quite a few people are more concerned with changing their spouse than with changing their own behavior. Actually, more people suffer from trying to change their spouses than from any other disease. It is our very human nature that leads us to believe that the solution to our marriage problem lies in fixing *others* so that we can be more comfortable.

But this does not work!!

We do not have the power to make other people change. We have no power over their attitudes and actions. We can't make our spouse grow up, we can't stop our spouse from exhibiting a troublesome character flaw, we can't force him or her to refrain from yelling at us or to initiate a deep conversation with us. While the law of responsibility tells us that we are not responsible for our spouses feelings, attitudes, values, or behavior, the *law of power* says that we don't have power over these things anyway. We can't change our spouse into the person we would like him or her to be simply because we have no control over our spouse.

Some of you may object at this point that some people do exercise control over others and have the power to make them do whatever they want. ``*He made me do this*" is a common argument of people who need an excuse for something that they either knew to be wrong of did not really like to do. We all know that this is a lame excuse. Adam tried this already in **Genesis 3:12** and did not get away with it. No one has the power to make us do things against our will. Not even an Army General has enough power over a private to achieve that. Others can limit our choices and give us compelling

reasons to do what they expect from us, but nevertheless *we are the ones* who choose what we do - and no one else.

In the same way, we have no power over the behavior of our spouse. We hardly have enough power over our own behavior - **Romans 7:15-23** describes this quite vividly - and even less over others. We can grow in self-control - that is one of the fruits of the spirit in **Galatians 5:23** - but the Bible nowhere tells us that we can have other-control, no matter how hard we try.

What then do we have power over? Here is a small list:

%3. We have the power to *confess*, that is to agree with the truth about our problems. We can identify our own hurtful ways in our marriage and confess them to God.
%3. We have the power to *submit* our inability to change these ways to God and ask him for help. And God will be the one who forgives our sins and brings about change (**1. John 1:9, Matthew 5:6, James 4:7-10**).
%3. We have the power to *repent*, that is to become willing to turn from evil and accept the change that God brings to us.
%3. We have the power to *seek reconciliation* with those whom we have injured. **Matthew 5:23-24** says

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

> Whatever our spouse does that bothers us, we can be certain that there are things we do that bother her as well. If we want our spouse to be closer to us, let us first make sure that she knows that we sincerely desire to change. Nothing supports our spouse's growth better than being sure of that.

%3. We have the power to *grow* by taking care of the problems that *we* create. **Matthew 7:1-5** reminds us not to judge *others* but first to remove the plank out of our own eyes. Only then will we be able to see clearly enough to help our spouse take the little speck out of hers.

This list is not what one would usually expect as recommendation for solving marriage problems, but these are the only things we have sufficient power to do. Unless we admit our powerlessness over everything outside our boundaries, we cannot expect to make much progress in our marriage.

Despite our inability to make our spouse change we do have the power to *influence* her. But there is a trick to this. It requires a *change in us* to motivate her to take a step in our direction. If we change our way in dealing with our spouse, she may to change as well - both because of a renewed closeness and because some of her old destructive ways simply don't work anymore.

The Law of Respect

One of the difficult problems that people experience is that their boundaries are not always welcomed. Others seem to get angry if we begin to set limits and we get the feeling that they do not accept us when we say no to them. If we actually experience that, there is often a simple reason. Our boundaries are not respected if *we* don't show respect for the boundaries of others. We get all excited about finally being able to say no, but we are not at all excited about *hearing* no. We demand freedom, but don't want others to be free to disappoint *us*. If this is how we feel, we may be in good company. But we have not yet made it beyond the level of children. Children only think about their own rights. Mature adults, however, desire others to be free in the same way they desire freedom for themselves.

This is exactly what the *Law of Respect* says. If we wish our boundaries to be respected, we need to respect the boundaries of others. We can't expect others to do for us what we don't like to do for them. Jesus points this out in **Matthew 7:12**:

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.

and in **Luke 6:38b** he says

For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Some people use two different measures: a generous one for themselves and a very strict one for others. They can be quite judgmental when it comes to the life of other people but do not live up to these standards themselves. But Jesus commands us to be merciful and forgiving instead of judging and condemning (**Luke 6:36-37**) - or in other words, to have respect for others.

I a marriage, respect means desiring and protecting your spouse's freedom of choice and dying to your wish for her to see things *your* way. She has her own mind, values, and feelings. If you respect that, you will see love grow in your relationship. If you try to make her the same as you, your relationship will grow cold.

Of course, this is easier said than being done. When two people marry, their lives blur together to become a new one. But many a spouse believe that love means that her mate will always feel and think the same way as she does. She feels unloved or even rejected when he expresses a different opinion or has different desires than she. Many young couples are shocked when they face the reality of two different wills, needs, and perspective for the first time. They fear that the love between them has already died. But in reality only the phase of ``being in love'' has ended, because it needs to make room for a more mature form of love - one that can create growth and a truly deep relationship that is based on much more than just a happy feeling. And this is where the Law of Respect comes into play.

If we learn to love and respect people who tell us no, they will begin to love and accept our no as well. If we walk in the spirit, we will give people around us the freedom to make their *own* choices, because *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom* (**2. Corinthians 3:17**). Our concern with others should not be ``are they doing exactly what *I* want them to do?" but ``do they really have a free choice?". Of course, we should voice our opinion to help them make a wise choice, but we must let them make them make their own decision - even if they are our spouse or our children.

So, when you are convinced that certain things in your family should be handled differently, don't just storm into the living room with a list of ``how things need to change around here". People who begin setting boundaries often make this type of mistake, which is almost guaranteed to lead to a lot of opposition. No one likes to be hit over the head with a new set of ``rules".

If you want your spouse to accept your new boundaries make sure that he feels that his boundaries are accepted as well. Sometimes this means that you have to ask him a few questions that can be quite uncomfortable for you, like

%3. *Do you feel I respect your right to say no to me?*
%3. *Do I give you guilt messages (for instance by crying), withdraw, become angry, or attack you when you set a limit?*
%3. *Will you let me know the next time when I don't respect your freedom?*

Even if you have a very close relation to your spouse, it is not easy to ask these questions because they are humbling. But they show your sincere concern and love for your spouse. And they can bind your marriage together.

What, however, if your relationship is burdened by problems and you can't really trust your spouse anymore. You may feel that you are putting yourself in the hands of someone who could use your respect against you. There is a certain risk that this may actually happen. However, even untrustworthy people need to have their legitimate needs and boundaries respected. Of course, you can't allow yourself to be harmed by your spouse. But you can respect his needs and still set limits on his untrustworthiness.

For example if your husband is a rageaholic, you can't dictate to him not to be angry. He has the right to protest what he does not like. However, you might tell him that his raging way of expressing his anger is not acceptable for you and that - for your own protection - you have to distance yourself from him - for instance by leaving the room - if cannot find other ways to express his anger. It may not be advisable to say this *while* he is raging, but you need to find a situation when to express this to him.

Respecting and valueing your spouse's boundaries is the key to a close and loving relationship. When you extend love to give freedom to your spouse, you will reap freedom in return.

The Law of Motivation

We probably all have experienced the situation that we went to an event, about which our spouse was all excited and we were not. Even after years of marriage, most wives care little about sports and husbands hate nothing more than shopping. We often consider it a total waste of time, but we go anyway, because we want to be loving.

But sometimes our going along can become a problem. If we accompany our spouse, only because we believe that a wife should be together with her husband in all things and that a husband must be with his wife whenever she wants him to do so, or because we are afraid of our partner's reaction when we ask him to go alone, our ``sacrifice'' is not motivated by love anymore. Actually, we will begin to feel resentment and join in more and more reluctantly. And when our spouse feels our displeasure, we will be disappointed to find out that he doesn't appreciate our sacrifice at all - because our inward grudging makes the outward act totally worthless.

In **2. Corinthians 9:7** we are reminded that God takes no joy in gifts that were given grudgingly

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

Of course, God loves the gifts and sacrifices we bring before him, but *only if we give out of our own heart.* Otherwise he doesn't even want to see our gift. And the same principle applies to marriage. We can do everything in the world for our wife or our husband. If that what we do is not motivated by genuine love, or if we even complain about all the things ``we have to do for our husband'' then our motives are wrong.

A gift must be given out of free choice. We must feel free to say no before we can wholeheartedly say yes. This is the *Law of Motivation*. Giving true love to our spouse requires that we make our choices based on our *values* and not out of fear. When we say yes, we must make sure that our motives are right, or we may resent it later. If, however, we believe that we *have to* and can't say no, we are clearly afraid of something. Typically, we are afraid of the following:

%3. We may fear *losing the love* of our spouse or even being abandoned.
%3. We may fear to *lose the approval of others* and do everything to please them.
%3. We may *fear the other's anger* and can't just live with anyone to be mad at us.
%3. We may fear *loneliness* and give in to earn ``love''.
%3. We may fear to *be a bad person* and believe that to love always means to say yes.
%3. We may be afraid of *guilty feelings* and try to compensate these by ``good deeds''.
%3. We may fear to *hurt the feelings of others* who have done good to us. We feel that we owe them.
%3. We may *overidentify with the other's disappointment* and interpret it as hurt, but we can't stand to hurt somebody.

Fear always works against love. The ``have to'' drives out the ``want to''. If we let ourselves become slaves to our fears, our giving will not lead to joy. If this is the case we need to examine our motives and work on overcoming the specific fear behind it.

When we have a tendency to comply, we should keep in mind that *no spouse in his right mind* wants a mate who complies with his wishes out of fear. He would not experience love and openness from her, because she may be there for him in body, but not in spirit.

The Law of Motivation says that *freedom must come before service*. If we serve to get out of our fear, we are doomed to fail. If we let God work on our fear, we will be able to create some healthy boundaries that protect the freedom that we need to serve wholeheartedly. Freedom is the key to a balanced lifestyle that fosters growth and love. While the Law of Respect says that we need to let *others* have *their* freedom, the Law of Motivation tells us to pay attention to our motives and to make sure that they are based on *our* freedom.

Of course, this does not mean that we only say yes when we feel like it. This would be plain selfishness. Sometimes our choices will lead us to sacrifice for our spouse and that can actually be uncomfortable and painful for us. But these choices are based on love and responsibility, not on fear.

For instance, a wife may find out that her husband has had an affair. Morally, she would have every right to leave the marriage. She might even cite **Matthew 19:9** as a biblical justification for that (although I believe this to be an abuse of that passage). Yet she may choose to stay and work through the betrayal with him - not because she fears loneliness or financial insecurity, but because she loves him and wants to do what is right and beneficial for their marriage.

The Law of Evaluation

Sometimes setting boundaries can be very difficult because we may actually hurt somebody else. For instance, we may have to announce to our boss who always brings in a two-day job half a day before a deadline that we won't do overtime for these jobs anymore. He may be hurt by our refusal, but meeting the deadline is his responsibility - ours is to do a good job during our regular working hours. In the same way having to discipline our children will be painful for them.

A common boundary problem is preventing a financial disaster if one spouse just loves to shop extravagantly and permanently spends more than the family can afford. Putting limits on spending by, for instance, canceling a joint credit card and installing separate accounts, would certainly create some pain for the spendthrift and leave many desires unfulfilled. But it would not cause any harm to her, while his continuing permissiveness would eventually ruin the financial status of the family and seriously harm the whole family.

A simple example may illustrate this. If we have to go to a dentist because of a cavity, he will certainly *hurt* us when he drills our tooth. However, he will not *harm* us but make us better. On the other hand, the sugar that gave us the cavity did not hurt us - but it certainly did harm to our teeth.

Hurt and harm are not the same, although many people confuse these two ideas. It is true: physical pain often indicates a physical injury. But this is not always true otherwise. *Just because someone feels pain does not necessarily mean that something bad is happening.* Actually, something good may be going on, such as a spouse learning to grow up.

And this is the essence of the *Law of Evaluation*: we need to evaluate the effects our boundaries cause others. Do they cause pain that may lead to growth - or do they cause pain and lead to injury? **Proverbs 15:10** says

Correction is grievous unto him that forsaketh the way: and he that hateth reproof shall die.

Correction can be painful for the one who receives it. But **Proverbs 23:13** reminds us that correction *prevents* harm instead of causing it. But setting limits that *harm* is unloving. They do not aim at growth but more at revenge - and this is to be in God's hand (**Romans 12:19**).

Finding the right balance is not easy. We actually have to think through the consequences of setting or not setting boundaries and then choose wisely. In a sense, this is the ``narrow path to life" that Jesus refers to in **Matthew 7:13-14**. It is always easier to go through the ``broad gate" and continue not to set boundaries at all. Most people choose this path. But the result is always the same: it eventually leads to destruction.

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

Yet, when we decide to set boundaries that may cause pain to someone we love, we need to see how this hurt is helpful and sometimes the best thing we can do for our relationship. This enables us to empathize with our spouse's feelings without changing our mind.

The Law of Proactivity

When people, who have been compliants for year, begin to set boundaries for the first time, we often see very intense reactions to boundary violations. Sometimes they explode in anger about a behavior they have tolerated for years. While this *reactive phase* of boundary creation is helpful to get out of a state of powerless compliance, it is not sufficient for establishing long-lasting boundaries that lead to growth.

Reactive boundaries are not bad. In some cases they are necessary, for instance to help a victim of abuse initiate a change. But they are only a first step that help you *find* your own boundaries. Once you have found them, you need to go further and

establish connections to others that clearly define who you are and what you stand for, love, want, and purpose. These *proactive boundaries* are very different from the reactive ones, which only tell others what you hate, don't like, stand against, or will not do.

The Law of Proactivity is to solve problems on the basis of your values, wants, and needs. Proactive people don't need to demand their rights anymore. They can solve their problems without having to blow up. They *live* their boundaries actively and don't have to ``do" them, that is to react to violations. They are able to love genuinely and thus do not have to ``return evil for evil". They can *turn the other cheek* (**Matthew 5:38-39**) without having to fear being run over.

The Law of Proactivity has three facets.

%3. *Reactive boundaries are a necessary part of growth and marriage.*

    We have to go through this phase, without acting out the negative feelings associated with it. Instead we must learn to express that our boundaries were violated in order to practice and gain *assertiveness*. And in some cases this may mean distancing ourselves from an abusive person to fence our property from further invasion.

%3. But, *reactive boundaries are not sufficient for growth*. Spiritual adulthood has higher goals than just ``finding yourself", a stage in which many self-assertion courses get stuck. This is just a stage, not an identity. A lot of damage can be done if we don't grow out of this victim role of constant protest.
%3. *Proactive boundaries,* on the other hand, *maintain love, freedom, and reality in relationships.* They help us keep our freedom, to disagree, and to confront issues in a marriage while holding on to the love we have for our spouse. The latter is hardly possible if we stay in the reactive stage.

This law applies differently to people at different points of their growth. You may have your reactive boundaries still ahead of you and need to get started. Be prepared that your reactions will not always be as nice as you want them to and find some caring people who can help you navigate through this difficult phase. Your spouse may not be the right person for this, particularly if he is going to become the victim of your reactions.

But once you reached that stage, go on. Don't continue to define only what you hate. Find out what is truly important to you and what you love and value. Begin integrating these positive values into your protests and then start living according to these values.

The Law of Envy

One of the most common negative feelings of humans in their relation to others is envy. Envy defines as good what we don't have but see in others and does not appreciate what has been given to us. How often have we heard someone subtly put down the accomplishments of others, just because he wasn't the one who accomplished this. We all have envious parts in our personality. It is part of our sinful

nature. But what is so destructive about envy is that it almost guarantees that we will not get what we want and keeps us perpetually insatiable and dissatisfied. **James 4:2-3** says

Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

This is the *Law of Envy*. Envy never leads to good results. It actually keeps us from getting what we want, because it focuses outside our boundaries. It is not wrong to desire things we do not have. God has actually promised to give us our true desires in **Psalm 37:4**. But it is wrong to focus on what *others* have or have accomplished, because it makes us devalue what God gives to us. If we begin comparing ourselves to the rich and famous (without noticing the high price they sometimes have to pay for that), we will never be satisfied. If instead we look at what God has allowed us to achieve without making comparisons, we will lead a satisfied life - maybe a bit simpler, but certainly happier. **Galatians 6:4** describes this difference

Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.

Envious people feel empty and unfulfilled. They feel envious about the other's sense of fullness but do not take responsibility for their own lack. And consequently they spend time and energy to keep up with the Jones' instead of addressing their true problem. And envy doesn't stop at possessions and accomplishments. We may envy a person's character, personality, and abilities instead of developing our own gifts (**Romans 12:5-8**) and bringing these specific gifts into service. Envy keeps us from doing something about the real problem, namely the negative feelings in us that block our spiritual growth.

In a marriage envy can be a strong hindrance for a close relationship between husband and wife. They may cause a feeling of rivalry or prevent us from setting proper boundaries. For instance, a wife may envy the aggressiveness of her husband when it comes to pursuing a goal and chose to comply with whatever he says, ``because he is stronger''. Or a husband may envy his wife's ability to express emotions and as a result avoid to express his emotional needs, ``because he can't talk about these things as easily''. We can't establish proper boundaries in our marriages unless we see our envy as part of the problem and begin to work through it.

The Law of Activity

When it comes to dealing with problems, many people have a natural tendency to wait until they have solved themselves. In some cases this actually works, either because the problem wasn't really a problem in the first place and not worth being dealt with,

or because others became active and solved the problem for them. However, all other things being equal, *active* people are much more successful in addressing and solving problems than *passive* ones.

Because they take initiative, they have a greater chance to learn from mistakes. They confront problems, try solutions, obviously make mistakes, and - if they are wise - grow from them (**Hebrews 5:14**). They even have a better understanding of forgiveness, because they need it more often.

In contrast to that, passive people are afraid of taking risks and making mistakes. They want to be sure that they do things perfectly well before they start. As a result, they hardly learn and lack practice in many things. For the same reasons, they also have a harder time taking responsibility for their lives and establishing good boundaries. God is not pleased with passivity: he wants his people to participate in life with him, not wait on the sidelines

*Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. (**Hebrews 10:38**)*

We live by faith, putting our trust in God in even the tiniest details of life instead of only doing those things where we have sufficient trust in ourselves.

Consider the contrast in the parable of the talents in **Matthew 25:14-30**. The ones who succeeded were the ones who took initiative. The one who lost out was the one who was passive and inactive.

Could the others have failed as well? They sure could have, because they had to take certain risks. But the one who did not even try, was *guaranteed* to fail - and that is the key difference. The sin God rebukes is not *trying and failing but failing to try*. If you try and fail, you will be asked to learn from your mistakes and do better next time. But what can you tell someone who didn't even try in the first place? What has he learned from doing nothing?

The sad thing is that passive people are not inherently bad or evil. They often are just afraid of making mistakes and losing the love of others. Or they don't see their lives as their problem. Or they are simply a bit lazy. Whatever the reason, their passivity will always result in the same: the problems are going to get worse. Passivity is actually the best ally of evil, because it lets the evil thrive instead of setting limits to it. The problem does not go away by itself - you have to take action against it.

A British statesman once said: ``All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing". We have seen that over and over again both in political arena. France and Britain did not stop Hitler in 1937 when the problem became obvious and they still had a chance to do something about it. Nobody stopped the genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo until hundreds of thousands of people were dead. How much evil could have been avoided if somebody had intervened *before* it was too late?

It is the same on the domestic level. An alcoholic in denial will not stop drinking if the spouse does nothing against it. Abuse will not stop by itself if a wife tries to endure it. As long as evil receives no limits it will grow and not stop.

The *Law of Activity* states that we need to take the initiative to solve our problems rather than being passive. Passivity never pays off. If we go ahead and try, God will match our effort, but *he will never do for us what we could do ourselves.* He will not enable passivity.

Even in a ``good'' marriage, passivity will hinder growth and development. If, as often happens, one spouse is active and the other one passive, several problems may occur.

%3. The active spouse may *dominate* the passive one or *feel abandoned* by him or her.
%3. The passive spouse may *become too dependent* on the active one, *resent his power*, and may *be too intimidated* to say no.

When, however, both partners are active; when they both speak the truth openly, set goals, and take initiative to solve problems, they both will grow. They will have security that problems will be addressed, even if for some reason they will not be able to do this. They can depend on their mate in that - what a contrast to a marriage where problems will never be addressed unless the one active spouse does so. If we always assume that the first move towards solving a problem is *ours* and don't wait for our spouse to do that, our marriage will prosper.

People may ask, how the *Law of Activity* differs from the *Law of Proactivity*. The former says that we are to take action instead of remaining passive, while the latter tells us to base our actions on positive values and not only on the things we hate.

The Law of Exposure

Boundaries, as we have discussed at the very beginning, are like property lines. They define where we begin and where we end. In a marriage, boundaries are particularly important because they allow two separate individuals grow together into one strong unity instead of having one partner dissolve and become just a part of the other.

Some people believe that they do not have any boundaries in their marriage and that they don't need them. But actually, that is not true. We all have our own feelings, opinions, and views. But we may not communicate them to our spouse and then it appears as if they would not exist. So this is not an example of a marriage that can do without boundaries - it is just a marriage where boundaries do not work, because they are not exposed. If we don't communicate our own thoughts and emotions, our spouse will not have the slightest idea who we really are even after 50 years of marriage. And this is quite the opposite of ``becoming one flesh''.

The *Law of Exposure* says that our boundaries must be made visible to others. We need to be truthful to our spouses and communicate clearly what we do or don't want, think, or feel. Unless we expose our own boundaries, our souls cannot be connected in marriage and our love struggles.

Take for example, a husband who feels wounded by the self-centeredness of his wife but withdraws from her instead of communicating his hurt feelings. He feels negated and unloved, but she may not even be aware that she ignores what is important to him. Then, as the dance continues, he will isolate himself more and more, thinking ``*What's the use. She'll only put me down and take about herself anyway when I tell her how* ***I*** *feel,* and completely hide his emotions from her. The consequence? She loses the connection to him and does not know why. And she is cheated out of an opportunity to hear the and start maturing in her character.

The biblical mandate is to be *honest and truthful*. In **Ephesians 4:25-27** Paul writes,

Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath. Neither give place to the devil.

What is said here about anger holds for resentment, hurt feelings, and frustration in the same way. We should not let the sun go down on it but expose it in order to work the problem out. If we hide all this, because we fear that speaking about it will only make things worse, we give the devil an excellent foothold to wreak havoc on our soul. If we bring it to the light, God and others will have access to it and we can resolve problems together. Exposure is the only way for healing and growth to take place.

Summary

If we apply these principles to our own marriages, we may observe that many of the problems we have experienced in the past were consequences of defying these laws. And we will also notice how many blessings resulted from living in accord with them. Following these laws will help our marriage to adapt to God's principles of relationship and change the way we relate to each other.

Dealing with Boundary Conflicts

In the previous chapters we have looked at the general principles of establishing healthy boundaries. We will now take a closer look at common boundaries conflicts and ways how to deal with them effectively. We will look at the boundary problems we have with ourselves and with the outside worlds, such as work, friends, relatives, children, and our spouse. Many of the boundary problems we will be talking about affect both unmarried and married people. But in a marriage they have additional

effects, which will be emphasized in the course of our discussion. Marriage-specific boundary issues will then be discussed in the next part.

Setting Boundaries with Yourself

Boundaries would be easy to set and maintain, if it weren't for all these people who make it difficult for us. They step into our way and overthrow everything we had so carefully planned. They catch us off-guard in our most vulnerable moments and just make it impossible for us to live the balanced life that we all so much desire. They even get into our way when it comes to our Christian walk. Life would just be so much easier without them.

In this section we want to discuss how to deal with the most difficult of these people. Who do you think is our worst enemy - the one who gives us the most problems?

When you ask this question you will receive all kinds of answers. People might name their bosses or colleagues at work, or people who used to be their friends, their relatives - particularly in-laws, their children or parents, and sadly enough their own husbands or wives. It is true - these people can give us a lot of trouble. The closer they are to us, the more vulnerable we are to what they do to us, and sometimes they can cause us a lot of pain. But the real enemy sits much closer.

As an illustration I will read to you a column from the Ann Landers page which, as so often, points at the most common problems in human life.

> A very weird thing has happened. A strange old lady has moved into my house. I have no ide
> she is, where she came from, or how she got in. All I know is that one day, she wasn't there, a
> next day, she was.
> She is a clever old lady, and manages to keep out of sight for the most part, but whenever I pa
> mirror I catch a glimpse of her. And whenever I look in the mirror to check my appearance, th
> she is, hogging the whole thing, completely obliterating my gorgeous face and body. That is v
> rude. I have tried screaming at her but she just screams back.
> If she insists on hanging around, the least she could do is offer to pay part of the rent, but no.
> once in a while I find a dollar bill stuck in a coat pocket, or some loose change under a sofa c
> but it is not nearly enough.
> I don't want to jump to conclusions, but I think she is stealing money from me. I go to the AT
> withdraw $100, and a few days later it"s all gone. I certainly don't spend money THAT fast, s
> only conclude the old lady is pilfering from me.
> You'd think she would spend some of that money to buy wrinkle cream. Lord knows she need
> And money isn't the only thing she is stealing. Food seems to disappear at an alarming rate -
> especially the good stuff like ice cream, cookies, and candy.
> I can't seem to keep that stuff in the house anymore. She must have a real sweet tooth, but she
> better watch it, because she is really packing on the pounds. I suspect she realizes this, and to

herself feel better, she is tampering with my scale to make me think I am putting on weight, t
For an old lady, she is quite childish. She likes to play nasty games, like going into my closet
I'm not home and altering my clothes so they don't fit. And she messes with my files and pap
can't find anything. This is particularly annoying since I am extremely neat and organized. Sh
fiddles with my VCR so it does not record what I have carefully and correctly programmed.
She has found other imaginative ways to annoy me. She gets into my mail, newspapers, and
magazines before I do and blurs the print so I can't read it. And she has done something real s
to the volume controls of my TV, radio, and telephone. Now, all I hear are mumbles and whis
She has done other things - like making my stairs steeper, my vacuum cleaner heavier and all
knobs and faucets harder to turn. She even made my bed higher so that getting into and out o
real challenge. Lately, she has been fooling with my groceries before I put them away, applyi
to the lids, making it almost impossible for me to open the jars. Is this any way to repay my
hospitality?
She has taken the fun out of shopping for clothes. When I try something on, she stands in fro
the dressing room mirror and monopolizes it. She looks totally ridiculous in some of those ou
plus, she keeps me from seeing how great they look on me.
Just when I thought she couldn't get any meaner, she proved me wrong. She came along whe
went to get my picture taken for my driver's license, and just as the camera shutter clicked, sh
jumped in front of me! No one is going to believe that the picture of that old lady is me.

We may think this complaint is just funny or is only a senior's sentiment. But sadly enough this is how people sometimes feel about who is creating all the mess in their lives. We like to think our problems are caused by others. We like to put the blame on somebody else instead of admitting that our worst enemy is us. But the truth is - the one who is really bringing us into trouble is inside us.

Although we hate to admit it, *we* are the ones who break the limits. *We* are the ones who do not do what is right but instead do what we know to be bad. As Paul puts it in **Romans 7:18-19,21**:

I know that nothing good lives in me. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

Boundary Problems with Ourselves

Let us take a look at some of the most common problems that we have with ourselves. What are the areas where we tend to lack control over ourselves?

%3. *Eating:* in the Western society overeating is probably the most common problem that adults have to face. Food is available in abundance and we find it difficult to say no to it, even if we are not hungry anymore. It is just too seductive.

   In general this is not yet a bad thing, but for quite a few people overeating has become a real problem. They can't control their appetite anymore and eat much more than is good for them. What makes it especially painful for them is

not only that they feel guilty after they have given in to the call of the refrigerator - even worse, more than any other addiction (even more than drugs and alcohol), the addiction to food becomes clearly visible to others. Overweight people feel an enormous shame about their condition and their behavior and that usually drives them away from healthy relationships and back to the food that promises them comfort.

Chronic and bingeing overeaters - like all addicts - suffer from an internal self-boundary problem. They use food as substitute for close relationships, sometimes even as an excuse for avoiding intimacy. The comfort from food is less scary to them than the prospect of having to deal with *real* relationships, where setting boundaries would be necessary. Some people find it easier to run away from having to do that.

Proverbs 23:21 says that *the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty*. While food should be enjoyed as a blessing from God, there is no blessing in the extreme.

%3. *Money:* people today are in the average richer than they were ever before. We take luxuries for granted that our grandparents could only dream of. But has that made life easier for us? Unfortunately not. People have tremendous problems when it comes to dealing with money, such as:
    - Impulse spending
    - Careless budgeting or not budgeting at all
    - Living beyond their means
    - Credit problems
    - Chronic borrowing from friends
    - Working more to pay the bills

Most people would tell you that they don't have enough and that just a little more money would solve all their problems. But the problem is not that they don't *have* enough, but that they don't know how to be responsible with what they have. It is not the high cost of living, but the *cost of high living*.

God has given us money as a blessing, not as a ruler over us. He gave it to us to put it to good use: *give and it will be given unto you* (**Luke 6:38**). So the money itself is not the problem, but our love for it, *for the love of money is the root of all evil* (**1. Timothy 6:10**). Jesus urges us not to be slaves of the mammon (**Luke 16:13**) but to strive for a treasure in heaven (**Luke 12:33**). But if we have difficulties saying no to our desire for money and spending more than we should, we quickly become someone else's servant, for *The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender* (**Proverbs 22:7**).

%3. *Time:* Many people feel that their time is out of their control. They are constantly busy and always at the edge of deadlines. They find little time to relax and their friends and colleagues consider them unreliable because they are always late or sometimes don't even show up at all.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 tells us that there is a time for everything and a season for every activity. Yet we try to squeeze in more and more busyness into the time we have and miss out on the balanced life that we could have. This problem is not new. **Ecclesiastes 3:9** already asks the question ``*What does the worker gain from his toil?*" and **Ecclesiastes 4:8** points it out even stronger:

There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

Today's society puts a high value of being busy. But this is not the reason why we have problems with time. The real causes for these problems lie in us, and not in what is expected from us.

- *Omnipotence:* many people have unrealistic expectations of what they can accomplish in a given amount of time. ``No problem - I'll do it" is their motto, and sometimes they add ``I'll do it for the Lord" to give their lack of boundaries a religious touch. But later they find out that it costs them much more time than they expected.
- *Over-responsibility:* some people are overly sensitive for the feelings of others. They think that leaving a party or a church event early might hurt others. So they stay until everything has been cleaned up and neglect other, more important tasks.
- *Lack of realistic anxiety:* some people live so much in the present that they simply don't plan ahead for traffic parking or other little delays that one should usually expect on the way to an important event.
- *Rationalization:* some people minimize the inconvenience they cause for others. They think ``they are my friends - they'll understand". While this may be true if you are late once, your friends will have little understanding for chronic lateness, because you regularly steal time from them that they certainly could have spent better than just in waiting for you.

A person with undeveloped time boundaries does not only inconvenience others but ends up frustrating him- or herself. The day ends with unrealized desires, half-baked projects and the realization that tomorrow will be another day full of stress and running behind schedule.

%3. *Task Completion:* is a first cousin to the time boundary problem. We would all like to say what Paul said in **2. Timothy 4:7-8**:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.

But many Christians find themselves to unable to be good finishers. They always start with a lot of enthusiasm, but when it comes to finishing they fail, even if they have enough time. There may be several reasons for that.

- *Resistance to structure:* they don't like to submit to the discipline of a plan. They either deviate from it constantly or have none at all.
- *Fear of success:* they are afraid that others may envy and criticize them. They rather shoot themselves in the foot than exposing themselves to that.
- *Lack of follow-through:* they have an aversion to the boring details of a project. They are more excited about birthing the idea than actually executing it.
- *Distractability:* they are unable to focus on a single project but always go off to do something else, which may or may not be important.
- *Inability to say no to other pressure:* they give in to the demands of other people and projects instead of finishing first what that promised to do.
- *Desire for instant gratification:* they can't work through the pain of a project and wait for the satisfaction of having a job well done. They want the gratification right away and give up if it doesn't come quickly.

People with serious task completion problems are in some sense like 2-year olds in their favorite toy area. They pick up a book, play with the toy car, talk to a puppet - all in one minute. They haven't grown out of that stage enough to keep focused on finishing things well.

%3. *The tongue:* Putting a boundary on what they are saying is a problem for quite a few people. Our words can deeply affect the quality of our relationships. Our tongue can be a source of blessing and curse (**James 3:9-10**). It is a blessing when we encourage, emphathize, or even confront others. This is what God expects from us. But it becomes a curse if we

- Talk nonstop
- Dominate conversations to control others
- Gossip
- Make sarcastic remarks (indirect hostility)
- Threaten (direct hostility)
- Flatter instead of authentic praise
- Seduce

Many people are not even aware that they have difficulty taming their tongue. But the Bible admonishes us over and over to do so.

*If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check (**James 3:2**)*

*When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. (**Proverbs 10:19**)*

*A man of knowledge uses words with estraint. (**Proverbs 17:27**)*

Taming the tongue is difficult, particularly if our emotions get hold of us. But we do have the power to control it - if we want to. If we don't control our words, we will have a hard time mustering self-control in any other area of our life. Our tongue is the key. If you find it difficult to control yourself in some area of your life, your use of words is probably one of the reasons for that.

Our tongue is the reflection of our heart (**Matthew 15:18-19**). It reveals what is going on inside. It is certainly worth restraining it, if the words that would come out are negative and destructive. We should keep in mind that a careless word, once spoken, can never be undone. Words do matter, because they can create a great deal of damage - and God will hold us responsible for that.

*But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. (**Matthew 12:36**)*

However, mastering our tongue does not simply mean hiding our thoughts but dealing with the evil inside us.

%3. *Sexuality:* sexual problems, especially for men, are more common among Christians than we like to admit. Almost all of Pauls letters admonish Christians to abstain from sexual immorality and the Church has preached against it for centuries. But that doesn't mean that sexual immorality doesn't exist anymore. It has always been there and still exists today - we just don't dare to talk about it.

   The reason for that is simple. People caught up in out-of-control sexual behavior usually feel shameful and isolated. They believe they are the only ones having a problem with their sexuality, so they are afraid of being judged if they are honest about their problem. And this keeps the problem in the darkness - exactly where Satan wants to have it, so that there can be no help or resolution. And so the sexuality takes on a life of its own - unreal, fantasy driven, insatiable. No matter how often the desire for sex is satisfied, it only deepens, and the inability to say no to ones lust drives one deeper into despair and hopelessness.

%3. *Alcohol and Substance abuse:* is probably one of the clearest examples of boundary problems. It creates devastation in the life of the addicts with lifelong and debilitating effects. But nevertheless the addict by himself can do almost nothing to get out of this because the time when he was in control is

over. He needs the loving, non-judgmental help of others and even then it will be difficult for him to get back to a normal life.

These seven areas aren't exhaustive, but they cover a great deal of territory in which we may experience lack of self-control. In a marriage relationship we will become aware of other, less obvious problems which usually don't show up when we are alone. We will discuss these later.

Why Can't We Simply Say No?

All these problems have in common that we almost feel forced to do things that we don't really want to do. We try to fight them, but that doesn't seem to work. We try to say no to them, but next time we behave exactly as before. Our no breaks down easily, and we feel defeated and frustrated with ourselves.

So before we discuss ways for establishing boundaries with ourselves, let us look at why a simple no - the most commonly attempted solution for such a problem - doesn't work. What makes it so much more difficult to follow through with a no to ourselves than with a no to others?

%3. *We are our own worst enemies:*

It is much easier to deal with an external problem than with an internal one. When we set limits in other people, we can do so because we are only responsible *to*, but not responsible *for* the other party. We can follow through with consequences if the other party does not respect our boundaries. For instance, when we are around a critical person, we can set limits on our exposure to this person's constant criticism: we can change the subject or leave the room.

But when we have to set boundaries on ourselves, we *are* the other party. What can we do if that critical person is in our head? Whatever we do, our enemy is always with us. How do we discipline such a person?

%3. *We withdraw from relationship when we most need it:*

Ever since the fall people have had a tendency to withdraw from relationship when they were in trouble (**Genesis 3:8**), although this is the time when they need other people most. Because we feel insecure, ashamed of our thoughts or actions, or are too proud to seek help, we turn inward instead of outward. And this is what really makes it a problem. **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10** says

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

When we feel that we have lost control over ourselves, we often retreat to work out the problem. We do everything possible to get back under control

and feel better. But most of our attempts fail quickly and we feel even more depressed and helpless than before. And we retreat further from others because we are afraid that others might look down on us when they see our weaknesses.

Yet, the only real solution is to bring our spiritual and emotional problems out of ourselves to the body of Christ. The trouble is that nothing feels more frightening and unwise and that we won't take that risk unless we feel very secure. I remember that as a young Christian it took me months to go to a Christian counselor and talk about the problems and sinful behaviors that I still hadn't resolved - just because I was ashamed of myself and afraid of what he might think of me.

However, there is no other answer to our problem than bringing it to the light. **James 5:16** recommends to

confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Grace and healing must come from the outside. Just as the branch withers apart from the vine (**John 15:4-6**), so will we wither emotionally and spiritually without bonding to God and his people. Whatever our boundary problem is - food, substances, money, time, task completion, our tongue or sexuality - we can't solve it in a vacuum. If we could, we would have solved it a long time ago. But the more we isolate ourselves, the bigger our problems will become. Just like untreated cancer, self-boundary problems will only worsen unless we let others help us.

Of course, as Christians we are not only the ones who need help but also people who can give help. Therefore we should do everything to help others open up in our presence. We need to create an atmosphere of trust and let others feel that we won't judge them, no matter what problem they want to discuss with us, but that we are genuinely interested in helping them. This is not easy: how do you convince others that you are the person they can trust in and that you really care? It is something we need to learn step by step - our Discipleship program may be a first step in that direction.

%3. *We try to use will-power to solve the problem:*

Another reason why our no doesn't work on self-boundary problem is that we try will-power to solve it. This approach is probably the most common attempt to deal with out-of-control behavior, but it doesn't work because it is overly simplistic: Whatever the problem behavior is - *just stop doing it*. ``Just decide to say no'', ``Make a commitment to never do it again'', ``Choose to stop'' - these are the imperatives that are so popular among Christians. But it simply doesn't work that way.

What is wrong with the will-power approach? The will to end our problem is certainly a prerequisite to solve it, but it is not sufficient. Believing that ``just saying no'' will solve the problem makes an idol of our will - something God never intended for us. Since the fall, our power to make the right decisions is not strong enough anymore (recall **Romans 7:18-21** and **John 15:5**). We can't make commitments alone but need the support of others. If our will were sufficient to fight evil, we wouldn't need a savior (**1. Corinthians 1:17**):

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

In **Colossians 2:20-23** Paul points out how little value human recommendations have, if they appeal to will-power alone.

Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, ``Touch not; taste not; handle not'', which all are to perish with the using, after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

Self-denying practices may appear spiritual, but in truth they are will-worship and lack any value in restraining our misguided desire. The boundaryless part of our soul will only become more resentful under the domination of our will and rebel against it, which usually makes the problem worse.

How to Establish Boundaries With Ourselves?

So if using our will to end our self-boundary problem doesn't work, does that mean the situation is hopeless? Certainly not, because we have God on our side and nothing can separate us from his love (**Romans 8:35-39**). And if God is with us, he will give us the means and the people to overcome our problems - if we let him do so.

Here is a checklist of 6 practical steps that can help us developing limits on our own out of control behavior. It begins with analyzing the problem and then shifts towards identifying solutions and finally practicing them.

%3. *What are the symptoms?*

The first step is to identify indicators for an out-of-control behavior. You may be experiencing anxiety, depression, panic, phobias, relationship struggles, rage, isolation, stress, problems at work, or psychosomatic problems like migranes, tension in your back, or stomach ache - to name a few. These symptoms *can* be (they don't have to) related to a difficulty in setting limits on

your own behavior. Use them as road map to begin identifying the real problem.

%3. *What are the roots?*

The next step is to identify what may have caused these symptoms. That may assist you in understanding your own contribution to the problem and the external influences that may have played a role in it. Identifying these roots is not always easy, but reflecting on your past in the presence of God will help. Experience[4] shows us that in most cases the root for your problems can be found among the following possibilities.

- *Lack of training:* some adults have never learned to accept limits, to bear the consequences of irresponsible behavior, or to delay gratification.
- *False training:* people who grew up in dysfunctional families may have learned that out-of-control behavior brings reward. The family came together when the alcoholic parents started drinking, a father's rage brought him the submission of his wife, etc. These bad habits, once learned, are difficult to give up.
- *Distorted need:* some problems are legitimate, God-given needs in disguise. For instance, God gave us sexual desire both to reproduce ourselves and to enjoy our spouses. But sexual addicts have diverted this good desire into something destructive. The same holds for food addicts, workaholics, perfectionists, etc.
- *Fear of relationship:* people want to be loved but are afraid of what a relationship might bring them (vulnerability, responsibility, sexual intimacy, new temptations). They use overeating, overworking, or an uncontrolled tongue to keep others away. They don't do this consciously, but their fear is actually the driving force.
- *Unmet emotional hunger:* adults who didn't receive true love during their first years, hunger for it for the rest of their lives. This hunger is so great that they don't find it in relationships with people but look for it in food, work, sex, or spending money.
- *Being under the law:* too many Christians grew up in legalistic environments that did not permit them to make decisions for themselves. As adults they feel guilty when they try to make their own decisions, which often forces them to rebel against this guilt. Food addiction and compulsive spending are typical reactions to that.
- *Covering emotional hurt:* people who were injured or abused emotionally cover their pain by eating, drinking, or working too much. That distracts them from the intolerable pain of feeling unloved, unwanted and alone.

Often these roots are more obvious to people who know you well. But they are usually too polite to tell you unless you ask them explicitly.

%3. *What is the boundary conflict?*

In the light of your symptoms and roots, try to identify your specific boundary problems in relation to food, money, time, task completion, your tongue, sexuality, alcohol or substance abuse. There may be other areas as well - ask God for insight into what areas of your life are out of control. And don't be afraid of receiving an answer. Even if these insights may damage your image of your good self, they are the key to a solution. Most people who don't get out of an addiction do so because they deny its existence.

%3. *Who needs to take ownership?*

At this point you have to take the painful step of taking responsibility for your behavior. Even if your boundary conflicts were caused by others - for instance family problems, neglect, or abuse - you are the one who needs to deal with them. It doesn't matter whether they are your fault or not - they are *your responsibility*.

This is a difficult step and our emotions may cry out against it. Why should we fix a problem that others caused in us?

Because nobody else will!

This is one of the situations where we need to live by the truth, regardless of what our emotions tell us. The problem is now ours and we are the ones responsible for addressing it.

%3. *What do you really need?*

Having identified the problem and realized that we have to take steps it is now time to actually do something about it. The question is how? What do you need to do?

People who ask themselves this question may quickly fall back into a do-it-yourself mentality. ``I have found the problem, now let's fix it''. As we have mentioned above, this approach won't get them very far, because they try it alone. But it is useless to try to deal with self-boundary conflicts unless you are actively developing *safe, trusting, grace-and-truth relationships* with others. Without God's source of spiritual and emotional fuel, you will quickly get stuck.

In **John 15:5b** Jesus reminds us that *apart from me, you can do nothing*. And **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10** admonishes us to work on difficult tasks together.

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

We need deep relationships with fellow Christians (*not just our own spouse!*) who help us work through our problems and lift us up again if we fail. That is

why we are members of a local church - to build such relationships with at least one or two other Christians nearby. The sad truth is, however, that most people with self-boundary conflicts do not have these deep relationships. They are not rooted in God's love, that we so desperately need.

*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. (**Ephesians 3:17b-18**)*

So what they have to learn first, is to connect to other people and open up to them. This is not easy: finding the right people, group, or church is already hard enough - but admitting that you need their help may be even more difficult. I know that from my own experience.

But there is no alternative - we already discussed that. If you try to solve your problem alone, you will often end up trying to cure your symptoms, because they are the ones that give you the pain. But dealing with the symptoms only doesn't provide the cure that you need. In general your problems will get much worse. It is like taking pain killers: they may ease the pain for a while, but if you don't go to a doctor to cure the real disease, your pain will only get worse. You can't treat cancer just by taking pain killers.

Jesus gives an illustration of this process in **Luke 11:24-26**

When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

It is the same with our out-of-control lives. We may experience success and drive out those demons of addiction and uncontrolled behavior. But in isolation our soul will remain empty and is just waiting for new problems to enter. If we fight them alone, we will remain spiritually vulnerable. It is only when our house is full of the love of God and others that we can resist the temptations of the devil.

How can we build such relationships with other Christians? Surely there has to be more to it than just knowing each other from church. But our Sunday School class is one way to get started. We could also form smaller groups that regularly meet in our homes, or prayer partnerships - all a means to open ourselves up and to get to know each other better. If we really invest into being a friend we will eventually find somebody with whom we can bond.

%3. *How to begin?*

After all these preparations you can finally practice setting boundaries on yourself. Here are some ways to begin.

- *Address your real need:*

  We mentioned before that an out-of-control behavior is often a disguise for a real need. You need to address that need and allow God to fill it, before you can do something about your behavior. For instance, compulsive spenders may find out that they use spending money as substitute for a loving, close relationship. As they work on building new relationships of improving the relationships they have, the need to buy things will slowly disappear.

  While addressing your needs in a godly way you may realize that some of ways you have tried to fill your desires before were sinful. People who need money to buy things may not be totally honest with their taxes or insurance companies, keep things that don't belong to them, or even steal - while justifying these actions by saying that ``I need it and it doesn't hurt anybody if I take this''.

  You will not experience any progress if you cling to a sin or try to justify it. This is You have to let go of such twisted thinking or your life will be miserable in one way or the other. **Psalm 32:3-4** gives an illustration of what your life would be like. The only way out is to confess your sin - that is to acknowledge your action as sinful and your willingness to let go of it.

*I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. (**Psalm 32:5**)*

James 5:16 even recommends to confess our sins to each other so that we can pray for each other in a meaningful way.

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

I know this is difficult, because we are all afraid of gossip or being condemned by other Christians who appear so much more spiritual to us than we know ourselves to be. But confession is necessary for healing. God will forgive and only then we can start again

*Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (**John 8:11b**)*

- *Allow yourself to fail:*

  Addressing your real need is no guarantee that your symptoms will disappear. Many people who address the real issue beneath their self-boundary problem are disappointed when their problem keeps recurring and are ready to give up. Was it all for nothing?

  Certainly not. If God works in us, this doesn't mean we will solve our problem all at once. God may want you to deal with your tongue first, before you will see progress with spending or eating problems. Sanctification is a process, not an instantaneous event. And God's pace for us may be slower than we like it to be, because there are more issues to be dealt with than just this particular problem. If we want to mature as Christians, we need to continue to practice to learn new things and should never give up.

  Learning better self-boundaries is like learning a new language: you need to embrace failure instead of trying to avoid it. If you try to avoid failure, you won't make any progress, because you can only avoid mistakes by doing nothing - and that is the greatest mistake of all (**Luke 19:20-23**). But when you stop worrying about your mistakes, you will be able to go on and learn from them.

- *Listen to emphatic feedback:*

  As you fail in setting boundaries on yourself, you will need others to tell you about it in a caring way. Sometimes you will not even be aware of your own failure - particularly when your problem is controlling your tongue - or you don't really understand the damage you're causing in the lives of those you care about. I certainly don't see that unless I am being told. Other believers can provide perspective, correction, and support at the same time, if you allow them to watch over you.

  Of course, the feedback you need is an emphatic one. Only people who make you aware of your irresponsible behavior in a non-condemning, non-nagging manner - even if they were the ones who had to suffer from it - have a chance to help you change. In **John 4:15-20** Jesus gives us a fascinating demonstration how this can be done. We need to be motivated by love, not by fear of somebody else's criticism, if we want to make progress.

  Biblically based support groups, which provide a loving and clear feedback, keep people responsible by letting them see the effects their actions have on another. We won't help each other by sweeping problems under the rug or by knocking each other over the head for misbehavior. But we do help each other by telling the truth in love. It would be my long term goal to build up such a support group here in

class, but that will require that we open up step by step and are not afraid of making mistakes or what others may think of us.

- *Welcome consequences as a teacher:*

  Out-of-control behavior usually results in painful consequences for us. The overeater has medical and social difficulties; the overspender faces financial problems; the chronically late person misses meetings and loses friendships; an uncontrolled tongue results in relationship problems and loss of friends.

  If we have to experience such consequences, we should not complain about them but welcome them as a chance to learn. They teach us that we have to suffer for irresponsible behavior and that the law of sowing and reaping is still in place. They give us a chance to turn away from our destructive behavior before it is too late.

  Some people argue that a loving God would spare us the negative consequences of our failures. They ask why they are being punished, even when the relation between their actions and what happened to them is clearly visible. Does this suffering mean that God doesn't love them?

  On the contrary. Of course God wants to spare us the pain. But when his word and the warnings of other Christians don't reach us, it is better to let us experience the consequences than letting us proceed and experience further damage. A loving God allows us to experience pain rather than letting us go on destroying ourselves.

- *Surround yourself with people who are loving and supportive:*

  Loving support from other Christians is one of the most crucial aspects in building and maintaining self-boundaries. You need other people both for feedback and for encouragement. Your difficulties are too much to bear alone. You need others who will be loving and supportive, without rescuing you from the consequences of your actions.

  Most people who try to support friends with self-boundary problems make one of two errors

  1. They become critical and parental, adopting an ``I told you so'' attitude. This causes their friends to avoid them and the chance for correction is gone. **Galatians 6:1** tells us to apply gentle restoration, not criticism.

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

2. They give in to their impulse to save their friends from suffering. They lend money where they shouldn't. They always wait for the late-comer even if that causes trouble for them.

   Rescuing others is *not* a sign of love - it is the opposite. By bailing others out, you won't turn them into a loving and responsible person. You only take control over their lives. If you really love them, you will let them go through the consequences of their behavior - even if that means some suffering - but support them in every other possible way.

This five-point formula expresses a permanent cycle: you deal with your real needs, fail, receive feedback and suffer consequences, and are restored by the people around you. Each time you will build stronger internal boundaries and as you do, you will build a sense of self-restraint that can truly become a part of your life.

Learning Self-Control in Marriage: Becoming more Lovable

So far we have discussed how to address self-boundary problems that may affect both single and married people. We will now take a closer look at self-boundary problems in relationships. We will first discuss various reasons why we need to set boundaries on ourselves in a marriage. In the following sections we will then study two major areas in which we need to learn self-control. The first is deals with issues related to our own character and the other deals with limiting our desire to control our spouse.

Resolve Relationship Problems - Whose Problem is It?

A first reason for setting limits on ourselves is that it helps us to resolve the problems, that we encounter in our relationships, in a proper and fruitful way. Every relationship, particularly one that is as close a marriage, goes through problems that result from the fact that two different people share their lives together.

There are different ways to address these problems. Unfortunately the most common approach is to blame others for the bad things that happen to us and expecting *them* to change their behavior. Usually, however, such an approach seldomly succeeds, because, after all, we're human. Let me illustrate that by an example.

Imagine your husband has a habit of working late. Every day you wait with dinner for him, but he never returns home on time. When you begin nagging him about his irresponsible behavior, he only becomes defensive and you get into an argument. He is angry at you and you at him. So what can you do? After all, you are clearly right and he is wrong. Don't you have every right to confront him about that?

No - because it leads nowhere. Experience clearly shows that nagging doesn't lead to change. It just creates a distance between you and your husband. So what can you really do?

The question you need to ask yourself whose problem you are trying to deal with here. Is his chronic lateness *your* problem? You may say ``of course, because *I* have to suffer from it''. But think twice! What is the real problem you have here? Your problem is not his lateness, but the fact that you are unhappy with it. Your problem is that you are angry and that despite all the nagging you are still enabling him. *That* is your problem - not his chronic lateness.

But his time problem is not your problem - it is neither under your control nor your responsibility. Remember the laws of power and responsibility? You are not responsible for your husband's behavior nor do you have the power to change it. So, his lateness is *his* problem and *he* needs to deal with it - we just talked about that a while ago. And your responsibility is to work on *your* problem. (**Matthew 7:3-5**)

What does that mean?

First of all, you need to work on your attitude toward him. It won't be easy but you need to place limits on your anger when you feel that you have every right to confront your husband. Your attitude should be a loving one, not that of a judge. (**Matthew 7:1-2**)

And at the same time you need to stop enabling him, that it you need to set limits on your willingness to make it easy for him to come late. You need to be a bit creative here, depending on your family situation and the actual reasons for his being late. But you may have to go as far as starting to eat dinner with the kids alone and having him reheat his dinner when he comes home. If you do this with a loving, but firm attitude you may actually see changes that you would never achieve by nagging.

Why?

Because two things have changed. He now feels welcome at home instead of fearing your wrath when he is half an hour late. And at the same time *he* has become the one who bears the consequences of his lateness - not you and the kids. And if he doesn't like reheating food he may even try to rearrange his schedule so that he can be home when dinner is ready.

Do you see the difference? Instead of fear or guilt feelings, it is love and practical considerations that bring him home on time.

Now I can't guarantee that changing your reaction will always lead to a change in your husband's behavior. This is not what this is about. This class is not about changing or fixing your spouse or making him do anything specific. It is about bringing boundaries into a relationship to provide an environment in which both of you can grow.

So what if he doesn't change - if he still comes late? There may be all kinds of reasons for this and in some rare cases he may actually have no control over his schedule -

although these cases are really rare because much of our pressure at work is self-made as well. But nevertheless, even if he still will be late you will notice that your relationship has changed to the better, because you have worked on *your* problem, namely your anger and unhappiness, and he will be closer to you because of that.

Why Me?

So, even if the problem that we're dealing with was clearly caused by somebody else, we need to learn how to set boundaries on *ourselves* if we want to see our problem solved. Probably we don't like that idea at all. Why should we deny ourselves certain freedoms to solve a problem that we didn't cause? There are several reasons for this:

%3. First of all God commands us to be the ones who take the first step to solve a problem. If our brother has something against us, *we* have to go to him and settle the problem (**Matthew 5:23-24**). If he sins against us, *we* are to go to him (**Matthew 18:15**). Fault is irrelevant - we are the ones that should do something about it - that is the law of action in practice.
%3. Second, we need to realize that more often than not, we are not totally blameless. We may view ourselves as innocent victims but in reality we play an active or passive role in the problem that makes it even worse.

   It may seem weird, but quite a few people need to be able to look down onto their spouse's behavior to feel good about themselves. They even get some form of reward out of the irresponsible behavior of their spouse: they don't have that character flaw that their spouses display and that makes them feel morally superior. Deep inside they are not interested in changing that.

   The Pharisee in **Luke 18:10-12** is a good example for such a mind set and even in today's Christians we can observe this more often than we may believe. We may not admit it, but sometimes our inner prayer goes like this:

> *Dear God, I thank you that I am not like the worldly people in this town. I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't take drugs, I don't commit adultery. Every Sunday I go to church and I give a tenth of my income to yo.*

   or

> *Dear God, I thank you that I am not like this husband of mine. I don't come home late, I don't leave a mess in this house, I don't have fits of rage. I am the only responsible person in our house, I am selfless, submissive, and I sacrifice everything for this relationship.*

It is so easy to fall into such an attitude towards the people around us, particularly those close to us. But do you think God likes that? Jesus tells us to take the plank of self-righteousness out of our own eyes before we go on removing the speck from our spouse's eye (**Matthew 7:5**).

So our willingness to set limits on ourselves enables us to take ownership of the problems that *we* have in our relationships. When we cease to blame others for the bad things that happen, when we stop trying to fix the behavior of others and take an active role in addressing *our* problem, then we become empowered to solve it. It doesn't matter who *caused* our problem - *we* are the ones who need to make a change.

Take Ownership of Our Own Lives

Another important aspect of setting boundaries with ourselves is that it enables us to take ownership of our own lives. We need to take responsibility not just for our problems, but also for our heart, soul, and character. **Ephesians 4:15** tells us that we need to grow spiritually.

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ

Our growth is is our job and no one else's. However, this is not so easy because we are more concerned about the problems we see in others - particularly our spouse - than the state of our own soul. But when we neglect setting limits on ourselves, we have limited our *own* spiritual growth. We waste our energy on changing somebody else instead of investing it into the person that we *can* change.
Let me give a few examples.

%3. Your husband is angry and you withdraw.
%3. You feel resentment at his irresponsibility.
%3. He is inattentive and therefore you let go of your responsibilities.
%3. You become self-centered because he is.

In all four cases you react to sinful behavior of your husband. But does this reaction help you grow? Obviously not, because what you are seeking here is satisfaction from your spouse instead of God's kingdom and his righteousness. However, Jesus tells us in **Matthew 6:33**:

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Your emotions may tell you that you have every right to react to your husband in this way. But the truth is that you will only damage your relationship and - even worse - your own soul. **(Philippians 4:8)**

We need to become more concerned about our own issues and not so much about the issues of our spouse. God hasn't given us the mission to fix our spouse - he has given us the task to seek his kingdom and his righteousness. And one day he will call us to account for what we have made out of our lives here on earth.

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. (**2. Corinthians 5:10**)*

And at that meeting we will not be able to blame our spouse for his or her sinful behavior - we still have to answer the question ``what have *you* done to grow?".

Avoid the Dangers of Playing the ``Good'' Spouse

Another aspect of setting limits with ourselves arises in unbalanced relationships where one spouse is more obviously selfish, irresponsible, withdrawn, or controlling. The other is perceived as the *suffering saint* who has to tolerate the pain of living with such a problem person. This perception makes it very hard for the ``good" spouse to set boundaries for himself. There are a number of reasons for that.

%3. First, the suffering spouse focuses more on his spouse's problems than on is own. The former are more apparent but as long as he focuses on them his own, less apparent problems, are not being dealt with.
%3. Second, the ``good" spouse often feels helpless in the relationship. No matter how hard he tries to be more loving and caring, there will be little progress, as long as he lacks truthfulness, honesty, limits, and consequences.
%3. Third and most dangerous, the ``good" spouse can easily feel morally superior because his contributions to the relationship problem are less obvious. He may even think that he is not capable to be as destructive as his mate, but this is a very dangerous position. **1. Corinthians 10:12** warns us

Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

Any time we focus on our goodness, we turn our hearts away from our own need for love and forgiveness. If instead we set limits on perceiving ourselves as suffering saints, we will be able to see what we need to do to solve our own problem in the relationship.

Learn to Live by the Same Rules

Another reason for becoming able to set limits on ourselves is our need to subject ourselves to the same rules that we want our partner to submit to. We can only experience a growing and mutual relationship if we are living by the same rules that we expect from our spouse. If we play the judge for our spouse, but do what we want, our hypocrisy will eventually break down any good influence on our spouse.

If you don't set limits on your own behavior, there is little chance that you will see your spouse put limits on a behavior that you don't like in him. If you complain about his chronic lateness but do not look at your own controlling tendencies; or if you become angry when he withdraws from you - are you playing by the same rules? Why should he change if you demand of him what you aren't doing yourself? Jesus tells us over and over again to do to others what we want to be done to us:

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.
*Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. (**Luke 6:31,37-38**)*

*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (**Matthew 22:39**)*

Of course, you may say that you are only reacting to what your spouse does wrong, but that is a pretty lame excuse. No matter what he does wrong, it doesn't give you the right for irresponsible behavior.

But if you begin setting limits on your own behavior and show a genuine concern for your spouse, there is a good chance that he will begin to put limits on his own ego and move back into a closer relationship with you.

Who is to go the first step? That should be obvious by now.

Free Your Spouse

The final reason for setting limits on yourself is that these limits create an environment in which your spouse is free to choose and grow. It is quite tempting to try to change your spouse because all his flaws and weaknesses are so clearly visible to you. But nagging, playing the blame game, or even complying to provoke some reaction are futile in helping your spouse to grow. What you're doing here is trying to control him and he will only react to that instead of addressing his real needs. He will be more concerned with staying free and defending himself against your attempts to control him than with solving the problems that you pointed out to him.

You cannot make your spouse grow up. That is between him and God. But he stands a better chance of changing if you let him experience both the love and the limits he needs, because he can now choose freely whether he wants to face the natural consequences of his immaturity. If you set limits on your desire to control him, you both will experience a life in truth.

*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (**John 8:32**)*

Setting Boundaries with Our Own Character

In a relationship there are two major areas in which we need to set boundaries with ourselves. The first deals with our lack of control over our own character, the other with our desire to exercise control over others. The highest calling of a man and a woman in a marriage is the call to love.

*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (**Matthew 22:37-40**)*

Love means that you do everything you can for your spouse, and one of the most loving things you can do for your spouse is working on your *own* character weaknesses while at the same time giving up the desire to control your spouse instead of yourself.

For most people a marriage begins just the other way around - we try to work on the weaknesses of our spouse and have no desire to control ourselves. But when you grow in love and faith, you become more tender and emphatic, yet more honest and firm in your convictions - and thus someone who is better to live with.

Of course, we cannot just will ourselves into maturity. Our will, as we discussed a while ago, is not strong enough to deal with our weaknesses. We will always experience defeat if we try to deal with our faults using sheer will-power. However, we can learn to be truthful about our faults and weaknesses, choose to repent of them and work them out. Often you need to take a troublesome emotion, behavior, or

attitude and decide to work on it with the support of your spouse instead of trying to deal with it alone or - even worse - letting it control you.

Maturing in a relationship will be a life-long process and you will never reach perfection. Yet, over the years you will see a great deal of progress if you decide to set limits on your own character. Here are some issues on which you can set limits.

%3. *Playing God:* By nature we try to play God instead of seeking him. Since the fall, we want to be like God (**Genesis 3:5**), determining ourselves what is good and what is evil - for us and for others. *We* want to be in control instead of submitting to a higher authority. We worship ourselves and want other people, particularly our spouse to praise us. We hate to admit this, but even as Christians we still want to play God ourselves. This is the worst and most hurtful aspect of our character, because we miss the mark in loving and caring about our spouse.

   We need to continually submit this part of ourselves to God. We can't fight our desire to play God ourselves - because even that attempt means playing God again. The only way out is asking God for help.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.
*(**Romans 6:12-14**)*

   We cannot overemphasize how important it is for us to practice spiritual disciplines like worship, prayer, Scripture reading, and Christian fellowship. Only God's presence in us will limit our sin. The moment we try it on our own, we will fail again. But if we do, we should not give up, but immediately go back into God's presence. Only he can lift us up and lead us out of our sin.

%3. *Denial:* One of the biggest problems for a relationship is a lack of truthfulness. When you do not admit the truth about who you really are, you disconnect yourself from your spouse and her love. When you deny your struggles, problems, and sins your spouse cannot relate to you and have compassion for your weakness. If, for instance, you hide a struggle with insecurity by attempting to be strong, you will have to face that insecurity alone.

   Even worse, your spouse will have little understanding for the mistakes you make as a result of it, because she can't see what is hiding behind your mask of strength. And then a vicious cycle begins. You try to be even stronger, because you are afraid that she will not accept your weaknesses when she sees who you really are and you disconnect further from her. This is exactly where Satan wants to have you - alone, without support from your spouse and other Christians.

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (**1. John 1:8-9**)*

You need to set limits on your desire to deny who you really are. The opposite of denial is confession, or being truthful about yourself. Confession can be a humiliating experience, but it connects you emotionally with your spouse again. It allows her to minister to you and express her love in areas where you really need her. And you will be surprised - most people who came out of their denial received a warm welcome instead of the condemning judgment they expected. Your spouse may criticize you for your failures, but she will understand the great risk you take when you admit your weaknesses.

It still won't be easy - I have to learn a lot here myself - but this is an area where we need to trust God's promises more than our fears. It seems paradox, but *when I am weak, then am I strong* (**2. Corinthians 12:10**).

%3. *Withdrawal from Relationship:* Closely related to denial is a failure to make and keep emotional connections. There may be numerous reasons for a spouse to pull away and avoid being open and vulnerable with the other. Some people have basic trust problems; others fear being controlled or hurt; still others can only set boundaries with their spouse by setting limits on the relationship itself.

Withdrawal often manifests itself as emotional absence. You may be physically present but still not there for your spouse. Or you may be able to give love and support but unable to receive it. Or you may disconnect when the relationship becomes too deep and emotional for you.

Whatever the cause and whatever the manifestation: if you allow this withdrawal to continue, you condemn your marriage to slow starvation. Marriage requires love to sustain itself. If you find yourself enticed by withdrawal, you need to learn setting boundaries on this tendency. Here are a few hints how:

- Let your spouse help you. Ask her to let you know when you pull away and how it affects her. Does it hurt her or make her feel lonely? Become aware of the consequences of your withdrawal will help you limiting it.
- Find out *why* you withdraw. Do you fear rejection, being controlled, or being judged? Are you punishing your spouse for hurting you?
- Practice exposing yourself to others, particularly (but not only) to your spouse. This can help you make new emotional connections and overcome your tendency to avoid relationships.

%3. *Irresponsibility:* Ever since the fall we have tried to avoid taking responsibility for our lives or to avoid the consequences of our actions. We all have this desire but some of us have not yet learned to set limits on it. They go through life arguing that it is not fair that they have to shoulder their own burdens. Instead of making the best out of the circumstances that God gave them to live in, they only complain about them. They blame others for everything they do wrong. They leave projects and tasks undone for someone else to finish up. They argue when others say no to them, particularly when they don't bail them out of a difficult situation.

   If you have problems with responsibility, you severely limit the freedom of your spouse. You may not even recognize that you have a problem here, but your spouse will surely notice. Here is what you can do about it.

   - Allow people to confront you on your irresponsibility. Ask them to let you know when you cause them trouble. It will help you change if they do so in a loving way.
   - Accept feedback and consequences. Tell others to stop enabling you, even if that will have unpleasant consequences for you. It will help you structure your life better.
   - Ask your spouse to love you but at the same time set limits on you when you don't set them on yourself. Neither silence nor nagging will help you.

%3. *Self-Centeredness:* Nothing is more natural than thinking more about your own situation than another's. However, looking at everything only from the perspective of what it means for us is one of the most destructive character issues in a marriage. Marriage cannot be successful unless we give more of ourselves than we are comfortable with. Yet, some people - particularly young men - go into a marriage relationship believing that they can essentially continue to live with the responsibilities of a single person while enjoying the conveniences of a married life. The result is that their spouse often feels like an object instead of a partner and that her thoughts and values aren't valued.

   The structure of marriage is anti-selfish. As we become one flesh, we expose our weaknesses to each other and become painfully aware of the limitations of our own goodness. We have to give up our independent ways and the idea that everything revolves around *us*. Unless we address our own self-centeredness, our marriage will suffer severely from it. Here are some ideas to help set boundaries on it.

   - Ask your spouse to let you know when he has the impression that things aren't mutual between you, or when he thinks that you constantly expect him to see reality your way. It will not be easy to accept when he actually tells you so, but it can be a real eye-opener for you.

- Learn to let go of the desire to be perfect or special. You don't have to be better than others to be loved. Your spouse doesn't love you for your beauty, talents, or accomplishments. You need to mature from the misconception that love depends on things that fail as you grow older, and to accept being loved for *who you are*.
- Learn forgiveness and grief. They will help you to accept that you are not the center of the universe and that your spouse will fail you quite often.

%3. *Judmentalism:* Many people struggle with a tendency to judge, criticize and condemn others, particularly the people that are close to them. They see everything as black and white and have difficulties accepting that other people are different from them. Out of a strong need to be loved, they often misread a person's actions and see evil motives behind them: they hate both the sin and the sinner.

Nothing kills love in a marriage more than judgmentalism. When you live with a judge, you're always on trial and fear the wrath of your spouse. Love cannot grow in such a climate of fear.

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not perfect in love. (**1. John 4:18**)*

That doesn't mean you shouldn't confront your spouse about his behavior and let him experience the consequences of his actions. Love usually grows where there is discipline. But the fear of punishment is very different from that. If you pass judgment on his very soul and character you cast both out of your relationship. If you condemn him as a person you kill all the love between you.

The Bible explicitly forbids us to judge other people but tells us to forgive.

*Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. (**Luke 6:37**)*

What can you do to grow out of the position of being the judge in your marriage?

- As usual, ask for feedback. How does your attitude hurt those you love, particularly your spouse. Judgmental people often don't realize how wounding they can be.

- Become aware of your attacking conscience. Most judgmental people have a strong internal judge who condemns them for almost everything they do. Learn to receive compassion and forgiveness, both from God and others.
- Learn to distinguish between sin and sinners. Develop compassion for the faults of others. Learn to forgive them instead of condemning them for what they have done to you. And forgiving means forgetting as well: you make a commitment to never ever bring the sins of the past up again.

I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.
(Jeremiah 31:34)

Remember that you need a great deal of forgiveness yourself.

Limiting our Desire to Control

Of all the aspects of ourselves we need to set limits on in a marriage, our tendency to control our spouse is probably the most crucial. Many people - particularly young women - go into a marriage believing that they are God's chosen tool to change their spouse into a better person. They think that their marriage would surely be blessed if only their spouse would change and the manipulations and strategies they employ for this mission are endless. Yet, the attempts to exercise control over a spouse are almost a sure-fire way to destroy trust and love in a marriage. Love must grow freely and independent of a ``correct'' behavior. Where people feel controlled by their spouse, freedom disappears and so does love.

*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. **(Galatians 5:1)***

What are the indicators that you are attempting to control your spouse?

%3. *Not respecting the other's no.* You make several attempts to change the position of your spouse or react very strongly to it.
%3. *Punishing a wrong choice.* When your spouse does something that you don't like, you become angry or send guilt messages.
%3. *Not valuing freedom.* You are more interested in getting the ``right'' choice out of your spouse instead of a free, heartfelt one.
%3. *Bad results.* Your spouse becomes resentful to you, acts out, or retaliates.

If even God, the only one who could justifiably control our decisions, refrains from doing so, then we should do the same. Our spouse will never be able to love us without that costly freedom.

In the rest of this section we look at the ways we attempt to control our mates and then discuss how to set boundaries on this tendency.

Control Comes in Different Flavors

The tendency to control a spouse is not only present in people that we might typically label as controllers as characterized in Section 3.3. Many people have no difficulties respecting the boundaries of other people as long as they don't have a very close relationship with them. It is the closeness of the marriage relation that reveals our tendency to take freedom from others rather than see our own freedom in danger.

Some of us have a very low threshold: they see a threat to their own freedom whenever their spouses are different from them. So they try to control their spouse, assuming that this would minimize the differences and thus strengthen the bond between them. Unfortunately, the opposite will happen.

Let us look at the most common ways in which we try to control our spouse and their destructive consequences on our relationships

%3. *Guilt:* Guilt messages shall make our spouse feel responsible for our well-being. They create the impression that our spouse's freedom injures us and that his choice to be different is unloving. Statements like ``If you would really love me, you would ...", ``I wouldn't have to suffer so much if you weren't so selfish", ``Why did you ever marry me?" - whether expressed openly or more indirect, wounded silences whenever there is a difference are used to convey the message. Some people even have a nervous breakdown or develop migranes or other physical pain just to express to their spouse: ``Look what you have done to me".

    Guilt messages are very destructive for your marriage because your spouse will feel both guilty and manipulated at the same time. Whether he gives in to you or not, he will not be happy about the outcome and *resentment* against you will grow.

%3. *Anger:* Anger is our basic form of protest that we cannot control the reality around us. It can be direct, like an outburst of aggressive emotions, or covert as in sarcastic remarks. Sometimes it involves threats of retaliation. In extreme cases it can even become abusive and thus very dangerous for the other spouse.

    Anger may cause your spouse to fear you and to comply with your demands. But it may also backfire and result in a severe fight. Either way, your spouse will build up *defenses* against you and the *distance* between you will grow.

%3. *Assaults on boundaries:* Some people simply cannot respect their spouse's no and make attempt after attempt to change the other's mind. They argue and plead until the other is worn down and finally gives in.

   Persistent assaults on your spouse's boundaries will make your spouse feel towards you as you feel about a strong-willed salesperson who simply doesn't want to give up. He gives in because he is *weary of you*, not because you have convinced him. But he also *feels betrayed* by you and this is not really a basis for a trusting relationship.

%3. *Withholding love:* of all the ways to exercise control in a marriage, withholding love may be the most powerful. We were created by God to give and receive love. When the person closest to us withdraws from us, the very basis of our existence is threatened and we do anything to connect again to the one we love.

   The dangerous aspect of withholding love is that your spouse may eventually *give up on you* and search for loving relationships elsewhere. Although this may not have to end up in an affair, the bond between you two has been severely weakened.

Submitting to Boundaries on our Control

If you truly love your spouse and want her or him to grow spiritually, you need to give up all attempts to control in favor of granting freedom and love and submit them to God (recall **Romans 6:12-14** and **1. John 1:8-9**). This may not be easy, because control strategies usually have turned into habits and are difficult to let go. Here are some steps for setting limits on your tendency to control.

%3. *Realize the cost:* Control strategies may be successful for getting external compliance, but they may also result in losing your spouse's heart. Guilt, anger, assaults, and withholding love all negate your spouse's freedom and love for you. He may go along, but will often be resentful and emotionally absent - we just described that.

   Your desire to set limits on your controlling tendencies will increase when you realize the high price you're paying for each little victory that your control strategies will give you.

%3. *Ask your spouse how your control affects him:* Since empathy and love are the very core of marriage, you do not purposefully want to hurt the feelings of your spouse. But you may not realize how much pain you create by your controlling behavior. If you ask your spouse to let you know how your control affects him, you may for the first time see how hurtful and distant your attempts make him.

   A feeling of compassion for your spouse will make you able to set better limits on your desire to control him.

%3. *Experience your own Helplessness to Change Your Spouse:* No matter how much you try, your spouse will not change his decisions, opinions, or feelings until he is ready to. You don't have any power over these (this is the *law of power* from Section 4.3) even if you would like to believe the opposite.

When you realize that all your attempts to control your spouse did not really change him, you will understand that your control mechanisms are totally useless. Accepting this helplessness may be painful, but it helps you to see where the reality lies.

%3. *Learn to Grieve:* Some people have difficulties accepting their helplessness, because they don't know how to deal with the resulting pain. *Grief helps you to accept the reality and let go of things you can't change or have.* When you allow yourself to grieve and to feel the loss and sadness about losing what you desire from your spouse, you will be ready to accept reality (**2. Conrinthians 12:9-10**) and grant your spouse the freedom that you can't take away anyway.

%3. *Work Through Dependency Issues:* Quite a few people know only one person trough whom they get their needs met. If your spouse is that only person for you, you will have a tendency to control him.

If you wish a healthy and balanced relationship with your spouse you need to find additional sources of love, approval, truth, and forgiveness. Your spouse should, of course, be the prime source, but not the only one. Your need for recognition and approval can be met by friends and colleagues at work as well. Friends can be an additional source of love. When you have other people to get some of your needs met, you will be better able to give your spouse the freedom not to meet *all* of them.

I hope that this class can help us to build some of these friendships that we so desperately need. You may have noticed that the people in this class care for each other's problems and needs and I believe that each of us can find at least one new friend in here - if we only dare to let others get to know us.

%3. *Be a Separate Person:* In some marriages one mate defines herself solely through her spouse instead of being her own individual soul. For such a person, every difference between herself and her spouse becomes a threat and she will try everything to eliminate such differences.

When you learn to define yourself by your own boundaries, you will realize that your spouse's feelings and decisions are *his*, not yours, and you will allow them to be different from your own feelings and choices.

%3. *Value your Spouse's Freedom:* The basis for how spouses are to treat each other is Jesus' Golden Rule:

*Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (**Matthew 7:12**)*

If you remember how you felt the last time someone attacked you for your choices, you will learn to appreciate freedom and grant the same freedom to your spouse as well.

%3. *Set Boundaries Instead of Controlling:* Does giving up control means you have to tolerate everything from your spouse? Of course not, because setting limits on someone and attempting to control him are very different things. Unfortunately, in some marriages, control strategies have become a substitute for establishing boundaries. You may find it difficult to say no to your spouse, because you are afraid of your partner's reaction, and resort to control strategies to avoid experiencing such differences.

   When you learn to set appropriate limits with your spouse, you will feel safe and become able to give up controlling your partner.

Marriage, as we have seen, has much more to do with bringing ourselves under the control of God than with controlling our spouse. When we relinquish control, we are better able to love our spouse, protect our own freedom, and provide an environment for both of us to grow.

Boundaries and the Outside World *[unfinished]*

This chapter will be written at some later time. It will deal with boundary issues at work, between friends, with relatives, and with children.

Work

Friends

Relatives

Children

Building Boundaries in Marriage

In the previous chapters we have discussed general principles for dealing with boundary conflicts in different kinds of relationships. We now turn to the closest of all relationships between two people and study what it takes to build strong and lasting boundaries in a marriage relationship.

It Takes Two to Make One

This chapter and the following one are the heart of our study. They discuss the very essentials of marriage relationships and what it takes to built the complete oneness between you and your spouse that both of you long for. Whether you will accomplish this oneness or not depends on how seriously you are willing to work on it.

Do not just read these chapters and forget everything later. Study them intensely, compare them to the reality of your relationship, ask yourself where God challenges you to grow, discuss this with your spouse, and put into practice what you both determine as important.

Oneness - Illusion or Reality?

For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united with his wife and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one.
(Matthew 19:5-6a)

Oneness - this is what couples dream about when they first meet. Being completely united with the other person and spending the rest of their lives in perfect union. Being one in thought, helping and counseling each other, trusting and confiding in each other, developing principles and values together, having harmony and companionship, having children and a sexual union in a protected environment - all these are aspects of the oneness we would like to see in our relationships.

But the reality of life often turns out to be so different - many relationships that started so enthusiastically end up in perfect disaster and the couple that was so deeply in love just a few months ago is almost ready to give up and separate again. Is oneness only a fantasy portrayed by movies, an illusion far away from the reality of life?

It is not. In fact, complete unity is what God designed marriage for. Right from the beginning God decided that *it is not good for man to be alone* and so he made a *companion suitable for him* **(Genesis 2:18)**. Man and woman were created to complement each other so that there could be perfect unity, joined together by God in

a way that no man can separate it again **(Matthew 19:6b)**. So oneness is not a fantasy at all - it is reality created by God for every married couple.

If this is so, why do so few couples experience this total oneness? Why doesn't the initial feeling of complete unity survive even the first weeks of most marriages? Did they pick the wrong person to become one with? Was their love not strong enough, after all? People have asked themselves this question for centuries **(Matthew 19:10)** and, sadly enough, many of them have given up at this point, divorced their spouse, and went on searching for a new partner - only to go through the same sad experience again.

What they fail to see is that oneness is not what a relationship starts with. God said that the two *will* become one, not that they are one right from the beginning. You don't go out, search for the perfect partner, and live in perfect unity from then on. It takes efforts to get there. Your initial feeling of being one with that other person that you love so much while you date is not the real thing yet - it is only a preview of what can be built over time as your relationship grows.

As the initial euphoria goes away, you will discover that living closely together with another person is not always easy. If you take this as an opportunity to grow and begin working on your relationship, oneness will become reality. If you try to avoid the growing pains, it will remain what it was in the beginning - an illusion that is still waiting to become real. If you give up at this point you have missed your chance to grow altogether and the next attempt will be much more difficult than this one.

In this chapter we will examine what it takes for a married couple to grow and what that has to do with boundaries. We will begin by looking at the most fundamental prerequisite of ``two becoming one'': to form a unity between two people there have to be *two complete individuals* to start with.

Two Complete Individuals Wanted

It sounds like a simple truth. You can't form a union between two people if you don't have two complete, mature adults at the beginning. A relationship will become severely imbalanced if one or both partners haven't matured yet. Being mature doesn't mean being perfect, but being able to do everything that living as an adult and relating to other people requires. It means having the ability to

%3. be independent and self-sufficient - instead of needing others to manage your life.
%3. have self-confidence - based on trust in God
%3. overcome selfishness
%3. give and receive love - the key ingredient of any relationship
%3. live out values honestly - instead of trying to manipulate others
%3. listen and understand
%3. provide
%3. be responsible - instead of blaming others for what happens in your life
%3. live within your means, keep a budget, and stay out of debt
%3. deal with problems and failures - instead of letting them overwhelm you
%3. live out talents - instead of hiding them

%3. build and maintain friendships
%3. have a life !

When these abilities are present in both partners, the oneness between them will be complete. But oneness will suffer if one of them lacks completeness, as his longing for completeness will take precedence of what he will be able to give to the relationship.

Marriage is not meant to be the place where you get completed as a person. If you go into a marriage expecting that it will solve the problems you have with yourself and make you more complete, the quality of your relationship will quickly go down.

So if you're not able to manage life as a single - don't even consider marriage yet. Marriage doesn't solve your problems but will give you new ones - you now have to deal both with your own incompleteness and the failings of the partner you're living with. You can save yourself and your future spouse a lot of pain if you first work diligently on becoming mature **(James 1:4)** and postpone getting married for a while.

For a man, for instance, becoming self-sufficient could mean becoming able to take care of their household, that is being able to cook, clean your home, wash your clothes, etc., because the purpose of marriage is not to get a cheap house maid. For a woman it could mean becoming able to feel emotionally complete even when living as a single. Otherwise you may become desperate to marry the first man available and that often ends up in disaster.

Of course, nobody will ever be perfectly mature in all areas of life. But the less mature you are when you enter a relationship, the more troublesome it will become. Marriage is contract between two adults and should not be attempted without two adults being present, that is two individuals who have some elements of adulthood and the desire to work on their growth in all areas where they haven't reached full maturity yet.

Complementing, not completing each other

Now some people may ask: ``why marry if I have to become complete anyway?" Didn't God say *it is not good for man to be alone*? Doesn't that mean that we need our spouse to become complete?

By no means, because that would also mean that being single is an inferior state of life, something that keeps us from being fully complete in the way God intended for us to be. But completeness and maturity does not depend on marital status.

However, marriage has the advantage that we can build a new union that is stronger than either of the individuals involved, provided both of them are mature. *Two are better than one* do we read in **Ecclesiastes 4:9**, because the two can *complement* each other, because they can bring different perspectives, talents, abilities, experiences, and other gifts into the relationship. When they work together as a team, each of them can take over those facets where he or she has a particular strength.

But *complementing* each other is not to be confused with *completing* each other. It is a good thing if a couple can say that they are a good balance for each other - in the sense that they bring together different strengths. My wife, for instance, has a much better sense for beauty and making people feel at home, while I am better at fixing things at home or organizing the paperwork.

That doesn't mean we could not survive without each other. Marriage isn't meant to make up for immaturity but requires each partner to be able to function as an adult in all key areas of life. It cannot be said often enough: *the crucial element of ``two becoming one'' is that the two are complete adults before they marry.*

Completeness that marriage cannot provide

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Many times people will marry to make up what they do not possess in their own character. Actually, this is all too often the true reason behind a ``falling-in-love'' experience. You meet someone who has a strength in an area where you are not mature yet and you immediately feel an intoxicating ``wholeness''. The other has all the characteristics that you miss in yourself and that makes him so attractive.

The sad story is that this attraction seldomly has anything to do with true love and, even worse, that the incomplete person often becomes completely blind to reality. She often ignores all the warning signs, which indicate that the relation is far less than ideal, and doesn't want to listen to the advice of parents and friends. She believes that their love is strong enough to overcome all obstacles and rather distances herself from friends and parents than from this one person that she needs so much. And all too often disaster strikes quickly after they marry: the relationship goes down rapidly and she realizes that their initial love was just an illusion. Let us look at an example.

A young lady feels attracted to a man who appears strong and assertive. He is able to take control of conversations and makes everyone around him feel at ease. After being around him for a while she gets this ``swept off her feet'' feeling. He seemed so much in command, something she always adored. What a prince she had found.

They begin dating and her initial impression turns out to be correct. He is indeed strong and assertive. Sometimes maybe a bit too strong and he doesn't always listen to what she says. But they were so much in love and her need for him is more powerful than her ability to see a problem here.

Soon the two marry and what initially attracted her turned out to become her worst nightmare. He was more than just assertive - he was domineering. And more and more she feels walked over and less able to have a say in what went on. It takes only a few months until they are ready for counseling.

What went wrong here?

Both of them had entered the relationship as incomplete adults. But they found their own incompleteness ``completed'' by the other. He seemed to provide everything what she didn't have in her personality and she seemed to filled all the gaps in his. But they soon had to discover the problems associated with this false solution to their incompleteness.

This situation is taken from a real example but it is so common that we should look at it in detail. What are the missing ingredients in her personality and what are his incompletenesses?

%3. Let's look at her problems first, because they are more obvious. She is a loving, social person, always willing to please others. But she lacks the ability to be assertive enough to stand up for herself and what she needs. She rather adapts to others than confronting them.

    What she needs, is assertiveness. But instead of developing it in herself, she found it in him. This is why she felt so ``completed'' when she found him. But in reality, her inability to stand up for herself became a big problem in their relationship, because she *reduced herself* to an extension of him and *allowed* him to walk over her. As a result her love for him disappeared and she began to resent him.

%3. He, as in so many unbalanced relationships, is quite the opposite. Compliance, vulnerability, and an appropriate sense of powerlessness are ingredients missing in his personality. And since these are real aspects of a complete person, he longed to experience them. And he was so attracted to her in the first place, because she she personified what was missing in him. But this attraction got lost when she began resenting him and wasn't the ``sweet spirit'' anymore, who gave in easily to everything he wanted.

Neither of the two is a complete individual. And trying to solve the incompleteness by a merger with someone who possesses what they do not always backfires. Her weaknesses only become stronger and so do his. And at the same time they blame the other for not giving them what they so desperately need.

Both need to work on becoming mature adults. He has to face his inability to hear and respect the no of others and his fear of being controlled when he doesn't control things. And she has grow out of the little girl who needs the approval of other people's and therefore tries to please them. God, however, expects her to address problems **(Matthew 18:15)**. She needs to learn to be more assertive, speak up for herself, and become comfortable with the conflict that may come up when she does so.

There is no shortcut to maturing. You cannot skip out on maturity by marrying into it, because marriage cannot solve your incompleteness problem. It only adds new problems to them that you cannot address properly unless you have achieved a certain

degree of maturity. There are certain abilities that each partner should possess, because they cannot be borrowed from the other, such as the ability to

%3. connect emotionally
%3. connect intellectually
%3. connect spiritually
%3. think for yourself and express your opinion
%3. say no
%3. say a wholehearted yes and commit to it
%3. compromise
%3. be free, instead of being controlled by circumstances, people, or moods
%3. have an appropriate sense of power and assertiveness
%3. be vulnerable and share feelings
%3. be responsible and follow through with what you are responsible for
%3. have a minimal amount of organization (including budgeting and bookkeeping)
%3. be real, without trying to be perfect
%3. accept imperfection and have grace and forgiveness
%3. learn and grow
%3. grasp and use your talents
%3. take risks
%3. have initiative
%3. be sexual
%3. have a moral sense
%3. grieve

This list, which is by no means complete, describes human abilities that God gave to each of us. But not everyone has learned to live and express them and this is where growth is required. You must become a complete individual on your own in order to have true oneness with your spouse.

For those who are not married yet, this means you better work on these abilities *before* entering a marriage relationship. You will save yourself and your future spouse a lot of pain if you work on maturing first.

But even if you're already married and realize that you lack completeness in certain key areas of life, you can still work on developing these spiritual and human characteristics on your own. It is never too late for that, even at age 50 and over - God wants you to become completely mature and gives you the means to grow into that **(James 1:3-4)**.

Key Ingredients of Adulthood

But how can you become a complete, mature, and adult person? There are certain basic requirements for adulthood that we may have to adjust our thinking and behavior to. They are usually quite easy to understand. The difficulty, however, lies in putting them into practice, particularly if you used to behave differently. But there is

no way out - if you want to mature you need to acquire these qualifications by constantly practicing them. And the earlier you start the better.

Take Responsibility for your own Treasures

Maturity means finding the balance between self-neglect and selfishness

In chapter 2.4 we already talked about the importance of taking responsibility for what lies inside our own boundaries, that is for certain aspects of our soul that only we can control, nurture, and protect. Let us briefly review our list:

Feelings
come from our heart and tell us something about the state of our relationships. Positive feelings indicate that things probably go well, negative ones show us that some problem needs to be addressed. Feelings should never be ignored. But they must not be allowed to have control over us either, nor should we hold others responsible for them.
Attitudes and Beliefs.
Attitudes have to do with our orientation towards life, God, relationship, other people, work etc., while beliefs are what we accept as truth. Both can be the source of blessing. But they can also become or one of great discomfort in our life, if we *hold the tradition of man* instead of the commandments of God **(Mark 7:8, Matthew 15:3)**.
Values
determine what we love and how important it is for us. They determine the priorities we have, for instance whether we value the approval of other people higher than the approval of God; or whether we value riches, power, and a pleasant life higher than spiritual values or relationships.
Thoughts.
Minds and thoughts make us able to accomplish great things, but can also be a source of pain and destruction. Therefore the Bible reminds us to *bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* **(2. Corinthians 10:5)**. Taking responsibility for our thoughts involves

%3. learning to develop our own thoughts instead of reiterating what others say
%3. growing in knowledge, particularly in the knowledge of God and his word instead of remaining on the level of children **(1. Corinthians 13:11)**
%3. clarifying distorted thinking, in particular our perception of other people, which may be distorted by past relationships and our own preconceptions of who we think they are **(Matthew 7:3-5)**
%3. communicating our thoughts to others instead of expecting them to read our mind, which is impossible **(1. Corinthians 2:11)**.

Behaviors and Choices
are entirely under our control and our responsibility is to accept the consequences that are attached to them **(Galatians 6:7-8)** whether we like them or not **(Deuteronomy**

30:19, Joshua 24:15). We can't blame somebody else or the circumstances for the consequences of our actions and choices, although many of us try.

Limits

cannot be set on other people, but only on our exposure to them. Our responsibility is to exercise them both for our own protection against evil influences **(Matthew 18:15-17, 1. Corinthians 5:11, 2. Corinthians 6:17)** and for the protection of our own freedom.

In the same way, we need to set proper limits on ourselves to protect ourselves from being controlled by desires, feelings, impulsive reactions etc, without having to suppress these entirely. We just talked about that in Chapter 5

Talents.

No passage illustrates the need for a responsible use of our talents better than **Matthew 25:22-28**. God wants us to *use* our talents wisely instead of hiding them because we are afraid of failure.

Desires.

we have many wishes, dreams, goals and plans that aim at satisfying some deeper desire in us. Our desires were made by God and he is truly interested in fulfilling them **(Psalm 145:19)**. Yet our responsibility is to separate good desires from pleasures and lusts that cannot really satisfy us and pursue the fulfillment of the former **(Matthew 7:7-10)**.

Spiritual Needs

, like a close walk with God are a particular form of desires. Our responsibility is to pursue these desires as well and see that they will be filled.

Love.

Our ability to give and receive love is the very center of our being. Our responsibility is to train our heart to give love **(Luke 10:27)** and to respond to the love that others desire to give us. If we don't, we will feel terribly lonely even in the most loving environment.

Our body

defines the physical part of our person, which is also the temple of the Holy Spirit **(1. Corinthians 6:19)** and shall be used for glorifying God. It is our responsibility to take care of our body, to keep it healthy and in shape, and to make sure that it will not be defiled by sexual relations outside of marriage. We will always regret later if we neglect this responsibility.

It is important that you realize that these are treasures that you should protect and responsibly control. This is the first and foremost requirement for being a mature adult. If you do not accept the responsibility for these treasures, your relationships to others - and particularly your marriage - will stagnate to the degree that you will begin blaming your spouse for what is entirely yours and require him or her to fix a problem that only you can solve.

For example, if a wife does not take responsibility for her feelings, she will blame her husband when she feels unhappy. Implicitly she says to him and herself ``*if I feel bad, then you are doing something wrong. You have to do something different*". How many

deteriorating relationships and divorces occur just because one partner depends on the other for happiness and completeness?

Or, if a husband does not take responsibility for setting limits on how much he can give to his wife, he may resent her for not stopping him from giving more than he can afford. He will blame her for expressing so many wishes to him instead of realizing that *he* is the one who does not say no to her. She has the right to express as many wishes as she likes to but that doesn't mean he is under the obligation to fulfill all of them. How much resentment in our feelings could be avoided if we would only learn to establish appropriate limits on our desire to comply ``for the sake of peace".

Many of our relationship problems could be avoided, if we would take ownership and responsibility for our own treasures. And if we would require the same from our partner and not enable his or her irresponsibility, our relationships would be even better.

Require Ownership and Responsibility from Others

Maturity means understanding the difference between being responsible to our spouse and enabling irresponsibility.

Maturity does not only mean taking responsibility for ourselves but also to let our partners do the same. We must not take responsibility for other people's problems, difficult as this may be at times, because this keeps them irresponsible and immature. There is nothing to be said against occasionally rescuing our spouses out of a self-created mess, but we have to avoid becoming *codependent.* If taking responsibility for our partner's problems becomes a regular pattern in our relationship, we are acting irresponsibly.

In Section 2.2.2 we discussed the distinction between our responsibility to carry each others burdens **(Galatians 6:2)** and the responsibility to carry our daily loads ourselves **(Galatians 6:5)**. It is a sign of maturity to understand the difference between these two forms of responsibility and to live accordingly. But if we have the feeling that we are responsible for everything, we wear ourselves out for loads that are not ours.

A good example can be found in **Exodus 18:13-23**. Because Moses was the only Israelite with whom God ever talked face to face, he felt responsible for dealing with everyone who was seeking God's will in a dispute. He didn't realize that most of these disputes could easily be handled by other people. He was just wearing himself out with trivialities that he wasn't responsible for. And the people were discontent because they had to wait from morning until evening to get their case settled. Nobody was happy here, but things would never have changed if his father-in-law hadn't pointed out to Moses that he was actually behaving irresponsibly. He had to let others carry their share in this burden as well instead of trying to do it all by himself.

Mature people do not take over responsibilities of other people. So, if you truly love your spouse, you support her wherever possible. But you also require her to become responsible for herself, because if you don't, you keep her from growing into a mature person.

Often, however, it seems easier to give in to irresponsible behavior instead of confronting it. But codependency grows quickly in a relationship and is difficult to reverse, because codependent people fail to see what is really going on in the relationship. They notice that their spouse becomes less and less content and that the relationship is everything but happy, no matter how hard they try. They are worn out, feel unable to keep up with what they see as their responsibility, and see themselves as a complete failure. But they do not realize that their true relationship problem is quite different from what they perceive it to be. Let us look at another example.

After years of marriage Scott was at his wit's end. He just can't be the right kind of husband. He keeps letting his wife down and doesn't know how to do better. There are problems everywhere:

%3. He doesn't make enough money to provide for her needs.
%3. He works too much and makes her unhappy by being away so often.
%3. He forgets to do things that are important to her.
%3. He continues to work with a woman who is a problem for their relationship.

Does any of these symptoms sound familiar to you husbands?

So, what is the problem here? Financial irresponsibility, non-performance, insensitivity - certainly not what you would wish for as a husband. So, is it really the case that this man is a complete failure?

Could be, but it is not very likely. Often the situation looks quite different if we look at what is really going on. In this case

%3. *Scott doesn't make enough money to buy a new car every two years.*
%3. *Although he has his business at home he has a couple of meetings during the week. Seeing him leave for three to four hours made his wife feel abandoned.*
%3. *His wife gives him long lists of things to do and sometimes he does not get all of them done in the time period she specified.*
%3. *He has an as-yet-unfinished business project with a woman she does not like. The project is important for his business so he refuses to default on his agreements.*

Quite a different reality from how it initially appeared to be. Scott does indeed have problems. But his problems are not financial irresponsibility, poor performance, and insensitivity but the fact that he is so codependent, that he does not require his wife to

take responsibility of her own feelings and attitude. He had never learned that he was not responsible for meeting *all* of her demands, but that it was okay for him to say no to some of them - even if that would make her angry.

He thought that trying to fulfill all her wishes would be a sign of love, but actually it was one of the most unloving things he could do to her. By giving in all the time he actually prevented her from outgrowing her unrealistic expectations and become a mature, responsible, content adult herself.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to each other in a relationship is the gift of honesty and confrontation. **Proverbs 27:6** tells us

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

We grow, when someone who loves us ``wounds'' us by telling us the painful truths that we need to know about us. This hurts, and we may not like it. But unless we feel this momentary pain, we will continue in our irresponsible ways and the pain that results from that is much greater.

Requiring responsibility from each other by telling each other the truth in a loving, non-judgmental way and not giving in to each other's immaturity is a great act of love that our partner deserves from us.

Value your Treasures and Those of your Spouse

Maturity means giving your spouse highest priority without being co-dependent.

In addition to requiring responsible behavior from themselves and others, mature people also value the treasures that have been given to them and their partners. They make sure that their own feelings, attitudes, thoughts, desires, talents, etc. and those of their spouse develop in the course of a relationship so that both of them will grow and become closer united.

How often do we situations where one partner ignores the value of these treasures and sacrifices them ``for the other''. Seemingly out of love for the other she gives into that relationship more than she can afford and lets her treasures waste, hoping that over time she will receive back what she invests. But this doesn't happen, because her partner doesn't see what she is giving up - how can he, when she doesn't let him know?

And years later, when the undeveloped treasures have left a deep sense of discontentment in her life, it becomes quite difficult to explain that things need to change because she missed them all the time. He will feel betrayed by her when he hears that she gave up treasures for him that he never wanted her to give up - if he had only known.

It is always a big mistake to give up desires and talents ``for the other'' unless, of course, you both agreed on that. And even then this should happen only for a limited, agreed-upon time. The longer you neglect the aspects that God has placed on your soul, the more discontent you will become and your relationship will suffer. In **1. Corinthians 7:5** Paul recommends:

Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Although he talks here about the need to have sexual desire fulfilled, the same principle applies to all other treasures God has given use. We should not deprive ourselves and each other from seeing these needs filled. Sooner or later, temptation will catch up with us when we do so. Do we follow Paul's advice?

In the same way, we have to think of nurturing, developing, and taking care of the treasures of our spouses. Mature people always take these treasures into account. They think of how their loved ones are doing, how they are feeling, and how they could help them grow - because they place a great value on their spouse. That doesn't mean they base their decisions solely on what their spouse wants - this would be neglecting their own treasures - but they certainly let it play a major role.

For instance, it is always wise to consult with your wife before making a major decision, even if this is ``only'' a business decision. You need to see how your wife will be affected by your plans. You should know what she thinks about them. Her wisdom and opinions could help you see a perspective that you might easily overlook and prevent you from falling into a trap. *Two are better than one* does **Ecclesiastes 4:9** teach us and that certainly holds for marriage relationships where one knows the other pretty well. You don't want to miss out on that.

Consulting with your spouse before making a major decision doesn't mean you are so dependent that you can't make your own decisions. It means that you place a high value on her. You will still be the one who has to make that decision based on what you eventually to be the right choice - even if that goes against your wives advice. But you have made sure that you have taken her perspective into account.

For the wife, of course, this means that she should take that value placed on her seriously and be honest to her husband. If he asks you for your opinion, don't tell him what he wants to hear - that would be dishonoring his trust in you - but be honest and tell him what you really think, even if that could severely disappoint him (a good example for that can be found in **1. Kings 22:13-18(...23)**). But never ever withhold your views and later blame him for a wrong choice that you could have prevented by sharing your views.

Maturity means communicating needs and desires without being controlling.

There is a fine line between valuing your spouse and becoming codependent and another one between honestly communicating your views and wishes and trying to control your spouse. The degree to which you can separate these from each other shows how mature you really are.

Maturity means becoming completely honest, valuing the other person highly, and acknowledging that your spouse is a separate and complete person. It says, ``I know that you are a person, too, and I am interested in the person you are and letting you understand who I am".

Separateness

Maturity means finding the balance between individuality and connectedness

The concept of ``you are not me" is one of the most crucial aspects of boundaries. We all are individuals on our own right and not just extensions of somebody else. That means we have to see ourselves as separate, independent personalities and at the same time overcome the basic egocentricity of life that gives us a feeling of ``*the world revolves around me*". There are several aspects to separateness.

See the Other as Person, not as an Object of Your Needs

The first aspect is the ability to see your spouse as a separate person, distinct from you, with her own thoughts, feelings, desires, and needs. Your spouse doesn't exist just to meet *your* needs. Although many cultures have viewed the wife as servant of the husband, God never designed it that way. The ``helper" in **Genesis 2:18** was never to be understood as second class person. By definition, a helper is a person who cares for someone who *needs* help. For instance, God is called our helper in **Psalm 70:5** - and we would never draw the conclusion that he is inferior to us.

So, you should never view your wife as a person whose sole purpose is to be there for you whenever you need her. This mind set is acceptable in an infant who has not yet understood that mother is a being separate from him. But in an adult spouse it can be a relationship wrecker.

Your wife is a person like you whose feelings, desires, and needs need to be filled in the same way as yours, who exists on her own right - not subject to your wishes - and has the right to have a mind of her own. And in the same way your husband cannot be there for you all the time. He has his own needs that have to be taken care of and the right to do say no to you.

For instance, when he comes home from work, tired and exhausted, and doesn't want to talk about some difficult subject - that is his right. It doesn't mean he doesn't care for you. He is just tired.

Or, if you come home from work and dinner isn't ready yet - no reason to get angry, even if you're hungry. Your wife is taking care of a thousand other things and maybe there was something more important that prevented her from preparing dinner. Actually, if both of you work - who says that the wife should always be the cook?

The problem in many relationships is that people tend to view others *only in terms of how they affect them*. Their only approach is ``what has this to do with *me*" and out of this arise thoughts like ``why doesn't she care?" or ``if he would love me, he would ...". If we do that, we reduce the other to an object or our need, and do not see him as a real person. And whenever we don't see our spouse for who he really is, love breaks down.

Allow the Other's Experience to be Different from Yours

The second aspect of separateness is to allow other's experience to be different from ours. We must learn to understand our spouse's experience, identify with it, and have compassion for the other in it. This is not easy, because men and women experience the world quite differently and do not automatically understand how the other feels, thinks, and experiences what is happening around them. But the ability to do so is present in each of us. *Empathy*, as it is called, is the bedrock of intimacy.

However, if you don't see your spouse as a separate person, you can't really empathize with her. You will always interpret *her* experience as saying something about *you* and you will always react to her feelings by thinking of yourself instead of her.

This becomes particularly problematic when your partner tries to share negative feelings with you. If you interpret everything as saying something about you, these negative feelings will sound like an accusation in your ear. And instead of empathizing with her, you will become defensive.

Imagine your wife tells you that she feels disconnected from you. What she is expressing to you in this moment are *her* feelings, nothing else. She doesn't hold you responsible for them (if she is mature) and there may be a thousand reasons why she is feeling that way right now. She doesn't want you to fix this (you can't do this anyway). She just wants your compassion - a feeling that you do understand her. If you see her as a separate person, you will allow her to feel that way, even it is not pleasant. You will know that these are *her* feelings, not yours, and that you are not responsible for them. And you will understand that she needs you to be close to her now.

But if you interpret her feelings as saying something about you, you will see them as lack of appreciation for all the work you're doing for her. You will become angry, defensive and anything but close to her. She tried to connect to you at a deeper level but you couldn't understand that because you only though of yourself.

We should keep in mind, however, that feelings must be communicated in a proper way. Sometimes we provoke an unwanted reaction by expressing our feelings in a way that our spouse cannot see them as our own experience anymore. If we link our feelings to what our partner does, we put the responsibility for our feelings on him (which again is a sign of immaturity, see Section 7.3.1). If you say ``you are so distant from me" instead of ``I feel disconnected", then you are not talking about your feelings anymore but blame your spouse for what is going on. Don't expect him to automatically translate your words into what you really wanted to say. He can't read your mind - this is impossible. **1. Corinthians 2:11** says

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?

If you want to express your feelings, then talk about your feelings and not about how he is or what he does or does not do.

Misunderstanding of feelings happen the other way around as well. Not all wives are able to understand their husband's feelings as independent from themselves. For instance, you may ask your husband if he feels like going out tonight, and he replies with a simple ``no''. If you allow him to be a separate person, you will understand that he gave you a direct and honest answer and accept that his feelings about going out tonight are different from yours. You could still tell him that *you* would like to go anyway and probably reach a compromise. But if you interpret his feelings as saying something about you, you will feel rejected and probably run into an argument.

Not allowing the other's experience can be a major cause of fighting and feeling misunderstood. But if you allow your spouse to have his own experience, independently from yours, then you will be able to care, empathize, and deepen your relationship.

Allow the Freedom to be Different

A third, closely related aspect of separateness is allowing our partner to be different from us. Whether or not we achieve oneness depends on how okay it is to have different opinions, moods, preferences, tastes, or needs in the relationship at the same time.

%3. What if one likes going out and the other prefers to stay home?
%3. What if one wants sexual intimacy more often than the other?
%3. What if one wants a big house and the other wants to save money to feel secure?
%3. What if one likes to spend the family vacation at the beach, and the other prefers the mountains ... or doesn't like to travel at all?
%3. What if one finds dressing nicely important and the other couldn't care less because he views clothing only as a means to stay warm?
%3. What if one likes to go to sports events and the other is not interested at all?
%3. What if one is a Democrat and the other a Republican?
%3. What if one believes in the death penalty and the other doesn't?
%3. What if one likes living in the Northeast and the other prefers the Southwest?
%3. What if one simple doesn't like the church the other is going to?

In many marriages, differences are not welcome. One spouse judges the other as ``bad'', because he has the wrong preferences, poor taste, political opinions that no Christian should ever have, is a lazy couch potato, uneducated, and the most insensible person in the western hemisphere. Or she takes the difference as personal

affront or lack of love. ``If he would really love me, he would see things the same way as I do" - this attitude is certainly not beneficial for the relationship.

In a good relations, however, partners value each other's differences and treat them with respect. They listen to each other, understand that the other has different views, reason with each other in order to achieve a compromise, and occasionally give up their own wishes without resentment because they value their partners' wishes as more important at this time. Oneness can develop, because twoness is allowed to exist.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another ***(Proverbs 27:17)***.

Difference are part of the stuff that cause us to grow as individuals and in our love to each other. Weren't the differences between us what we liked so much about our partner when we first met her? Wasn't it fascinating to get to know a person who did so many things differently from us? Why then do we fight about them for the rest of our lives?

To the immature differences may appear threatening and imply distance, lack of love, abandonment, or rejection. But in reality they are exciting, because they help us to look beyond our narrow horizon and enjoy something we do not possess. Don't be afraid of differences. Learn to embrace them as a chance for growth and handle them in a way that builds unity in diversity.

Cherish the Other as Adorable Individual

The most beautiful aspect of separateness is the ability to enjoy your spouses very existence, to love her not because she is meeting some need or interest of yours but just for who she is. You see her as a person with all her inner and outer beauty; her way of experiencing life that is so fascinatingly different from yours; a person whom you value, cherish, and want to know closer and closer.

Wasn't that what you saw in her when you first dated? The person that you found so attractive and interesting? The one that you always wanted to be near with? The one that you loved for who she was apart from what she could give you?

Proverbs 5:18 tells you to *rejoice in the wife of your youth*. If you continue to see your spouse as a separate person - independent from you, yet near you - you will be able to look at her in the same way you looked at her then: the person you love for who she is.

This aspect of separateness is one of the beautiful aspects of love that gives the most pleasures as couples grow together.

Respect for Freedom

Another important prerequisite for love is freedom. Love cannot grow if people try to control each other, because control results in slavery or rebellion, but not in love. You ability to grant your spouse to be a free, separate person is one of the hallmarks of a solid, loving relationship.

Freedom to have Space

Many people struggle with allowing their spouses to be free. They see time apart, separateness, and the desire of the other to have space as threat for their relationship, lack of love, or even abandonment. They only feel loved when their spouse is with them. They cling so close to him that they almost strangle him and their relationship doesn't have a chance to develop the closeness that they so desperately desire.

In a good marriage two mature people have found the right balance between being deeply connected and being free to act as individuals. This balance enables them to grow both as individuals and within their relationship. You desire to be close to each other, yet you also see the need for letting each other have your own time and space - time to follow one's own interests, and space to do things on one's own without you. You have realized that giving him time and space is not a sacrifice on your part, but actually serves to strengthen your relationship. After you have been apart you come together and share each other's experience. Wasn't that part of what made you feel close when you first dated?

In **Proverbs 31:10-31** we find a great picture of such a relationship. It is not, as many people see it, the description of the superwoman who does it all while her husband is having a good time, but a description of a woman who has lots of activities on her own apart from her husband, while he has the same. He *has full confidence in her* and *she brings him good, not harm all the days of her life* (verses 11-12). He is full of praise for her, because he values her very being

Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
(Proverbs 31:29-30)

Both of them exhibit their own separateness, yet they are deeply connected - much deeper than couples that stay closely together because they fear separateness.

But how much freedom is good for a relationship? Where is the right balance between separateness and being together? There is no general rule that works well for all couples. ``2 evenings per week with your friends" or ``15 days for business trips apart from home" may be the maximum one couple can endure while others might feel enslaved with so little time for themselves. What we feel comfortable with may be totally unacceptable for another couple.

The amount has to be negotiated with wisdom so that neither the ``we" nor the individual ``I's"suffer. This is especially important when the preferences of the two spouses differ strongly. Some men, for instance, have a great sense of independence,

particularly when they lived as single for many years, while their wives have a strong desire for being together. It is crucial that you honestly express to your spouse what *you* desire instead of making assumptions about what he or she likes to hear. What are the activities you need space for (hobbies, friends, church, ...)? what are the ones you would like to do together? How much time do you need for yourself? How much time without each other can you endure? And then you decide together on a compromise that is acceptable for both of you.

For some people, who never learned to negotiate but either had it completely their way or gave up their position completely, this can be difficult. Therefore it is important to be completely honest about your wishes here so that you can whole-heartedly agree to the decision that both of you made.

Obviously, freedom is to be used responsibly. The call to a relationship with God and each other is a call to freedom. But that freedom is not to be used to gratify self-centeredness. In **Galatians 5:13**, Paul warns us

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge in sinful nature; rather serve one another in love.

Some spouses use their freedom to indulge their own desires at the expense of the marriage relationship. Golfing widows, wives of hunters and fishermen, and husbands of over-committed wives can testify how much a marriage can suffer under the misuse of freedom. A misuse of freedom does not serve anyone's growth, much less the growth of the relationship.

The Bible offers the best guideline for a responsible use of freedom: *Love your neighbor as yourself* **(Matthew 22:39)**. When exercising your freedom and separateness, consider how it affects your spouse. Would you want to be treated with disregard or neglect? Certainly not. This should help you to put proper limits on your freedom.

Stop the Desire to Control

In the same way, the Golden Rule helps you to puts limits on your desire to control your spouse. When trying to limit your spouse's freedom ask yourself: would you like to be imprisoned by your spouse? You surely would not, so give him the freedom that you expect from him.

If the Golden Rule doesn't convince you to stop being controlling, maybe fear will. Control puts an end to love because it will trigger rebellion against the ``slavery'' that you're imposing on your spouse, because resistance against any form of slavery is what God has put into our hearts. In **Galatians 5:1** Paul writes

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourself be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

So, if you are a controller, remember the price you will pay. Your spouse will either fight your control, to regain the freedom that you are trying to take away from him. Or she will submit to your control and become a mere extension of yourself. Either way, the ``we'' will disappear and there will be no unity between the two of you.

Rebellion against control is the motivation behind many many problems that suddenly burden your relationship. The spouse who feels controlled may try to escape you by working overtime or becoming overly involved in volunteer work and church activities, try to break out of your control by overspending or overeating, or search for someone who accepts him and fall into the trap of an affair. **Proverbs 7:21-23** is the sad description of how easily that can happen.

The more you try to tighten your control over your spouse the greater is the chance that you will drive him away completely. If you want to lose him, nagging and guilt messages are probably the best method to accomplish that. But if you give freedom and require a responsible use of that freedom, the tie between the two of you will become stronger and stronger.

Why is this so?

Freedom Creates Longing

God designed human beings with a longing for relationship, a longing not to be alone. We all have this longing, because *it is not good for the man to be alone* **(Genesis 2:18)**. While single people satisfy this longing with friends and relatives, married people meet part of it by finding a life partner. That is what marriage was designed for.

Freedom is designed to increase this longing for each other and thus strengthen the relationship. Many couples who are separate for a time experience this as a paradox - they feel a stronger desire for each other the longer they are apart, much stronger than when they are together. It usually confuses them and makes them question whether something is wrong with their relationship.

But actually, this is a natural process. Freedom nourishes separateness, which in itself is *an undesirable state*, because you're alone again. Therefore it creates the very longing that brings the couple together over and over again. If you build freedom into your relationship, your desire to be together will grow and your unity is strengthened.

This paradox is one of the balancing truths in God's universe. A healthy degree of separateness will automatically bring you back into the state of togetherness. Only the extremes are destructive: too much separateness makes you become disconnected and no separateness destroys the individuality of at least one of the partners.

The need for freedom is a part of God's design for marriage. Make sure that you find the right balance between freedom and togetherness. The freedom you grant will

increase your longing for each other. The togetherness you experience will then create more love which in turn gives rise to more freedom. Friends, hobbies, work, and time apart are all part of that mixture. Nurture them and your relationship will become stronger than ever before.

What You Value is What You Get

> ***Lost Chapter of Genesis***
>
> *``So'', God asked Adam, ``What is wrong with you?'' Adam said he didn't have anyone to talk to.*
>
> *God said that He was going to make Adam a companion and that it would be a woman. God said, "This person will gather food for you, cook for you, and when you discover clothing she'll wash it for you. She will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you and will always be the first to admit she was wrong when you've had a disagreement. She will never have a headache and will freely give you love and passion whenever you need it."*
>
> *Adam asked God, ``What will a woman like this cost?'' God replied, ``An arm and a leg.'' Then Adam asked, ``What can I get for a rib?''*
>
> *The rest is history*

In the previous chapters we have discussed the role of boundaries as protection against bad things and sin. We studied how important it is to prevent bad habits from receiving a permanent presence in your life. We mentioned that compliance and tolerance for evil - as loving as that may appear to be - often enables irresponsibility, as others do not experience the consequences of their behavior. Yet many Christians, particularly women, confuse tolerance and compliance with submission and experience much evil and sin against them, because they believe God requires them to accept this.

Many marriages suffer because of that: one spouse breaks the rules and the other simply tolerates that, hoping that eventually their marriage would improve. But why should it? Why should there be any change if no one speaks up against sinful behavior? Is silence and compliance really a sign of love and submission? Did God

actually say that we should tolerate sin .....and hate those who sin against us? Or wasn't it the other way around?

Matthew 18:15 tells us to go to our brother who sins against us and to show his sin to him. There is a good chance that we will convince him and win him back, because he might not even be aware how much his behavior affects us. But we are *so* afraid that this might not work out - because in our heart we don't believe that our brother is willing to change - that we do not trust God's command and rather let things happen. And as a consequence, *we get what we tolerate* and our relationship suffers more and more.

This should not be so! We must learn to *do* what God tells us to do if we want to experience growth in our relationships. We need to learn to establish and maintain boundaries to be able to live a balanced and fulfilled life.

But there is more to boundaries than just protection against evil. Boundaries also help us to experience the good things in our life that God has prepared for us. How can this be?

The principle is as simple as before. Just as we will get the bad things that we tolerate, so will we see the good things happen that we truly value. *What we value is what we will have.* Why is this so?

If we truly value something, we will not only protect it from being destroyed but also do everything to nurture it. Because it is high on our priority list, we will invest time and energy to make it happen. If we value honesty and love in our relationship, we will actively seek to build it, practice it, and see it grow. If we seek a close relationship with God, we will spend more and more time with him and experience how he transforms us.

But this only works if we put a high value on honesty, love, and a close relationship with God. If these are just wishes that have to compete with many other desires on our priority list, we will put little emphasis on them. Chances are that we won't see them happen.

One of the strongest indicators for what our true values are is persistence. The persistent widow in **Luke 18:1-8** wanted to see justice, so she kept bugging the judge until he finally handled her case. Because she valued justice so highly, she was persistent enough to eventually see it happen. There is a promise for us in this parable.

*And will God not bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly **(Luke 18:7-8a)**.*

God will make sure that we will receive what we need if we are only persistent enough. Does that mean we get everything we want? Of course not, we need to be realistic and understand that some values are beneficial and others are not.

You do not have, because you do not ask God. And when you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures ***(James 4:2b-3)***.

There is nothing bad with the treasures of this world. God often gives material blessings and we may use them wisely and enjoy them. But if these things become more important to us than he, God will not give to us what drives us away from him.

So the question is - what do we really value? And which of these values are good for our relationships? How do we set the right priorities? A good example can be found in **(Luke 10:38-42)**, where Jesus visits the house of Martha and Mary.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman called Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ``Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!

``Martha, Martha'', the Lord answered, ``you are worried about many things but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.

How many Martha's do we have in today's churches? We care about many good things but we ignore the ones that are even better. We spend so much time and energy on preparing for things that are nice, but distract us from the really important issues. We want our homes to be nice, particularly when there are guests, but the preparations wear us out. We work hard to provide for our family, but do not have time for our wife and children. We work for charities and church committees and fail to see the spiritual needs of the people that live around us. What we do is good, but in these cases *the good is the enemy of the better*.

If we pursue good values but ignore those that are even more important, then we will hardly see the latter ones have an impact on our life. We won't see growth because we focus too much on the less important things - they take all our attention and energy away.

What then are good values and bad values when it comes to building relationships? Which values build up, and which ones may actually put a burden on our marriage? What should we magnify and lift up to guide us? And how in the world can we learn to give the more important values highest priority?

There are a few values that the Bible holds in very high esteem, and these values produce great marriages. 1

%3. Love of God, based on a personal relationship with God
%3. Love of Your Spouse, which includes the desire to spend time together and to serve one another and many other characteristics listed in **1. Corinthians 13**.
%3. Compassion and Forgiveness
%3. Honesty and Trust
%3. Faithfulness
%3. Holiness

However, there are many more values that we cannot discuss here. Certainly it is not possible to classify all possible values as either good or bad. Each couple is different from others and has to decide if certain values are beneficial for them or not. What might be good for Barbara and me could be disastrous for your relationship. And some values that are good for your marriage simply wouldn't work in ours.

If you haven't already done so, you may take some time to discuss your values with your spouse. It would be naive to assume that you and your spouse have the same or ``the right'' ones. You are different individuals with different backgrounds and priorities. You need to talk about what is important to you as individuals. And please be honest - don't just talk about the values that you believe you should have (like the ones we will discuss here). Talk about what is really important for you, because it is the driving force behind everything you do. Your spouse has a right to know that.

Only then you can talk about what is important to as a family. And when both of you have agreed on a common set of family values you may have to discuss whether certain individual values may be obstacles for these family values. Ideally this discussion should have taken place before you married, but I know that many couples, including Barbara and myself, did not do that. Besides, some values change when we grow older and our circumstances change, so they must be discussed again.

To get a better understanding for the importance of such a discussion, let us take a look at a value that appears to be good but is quite destructive for a relationship. Many people, including Christians, have this value high on their priority list, and they believe it to be the essence of life here on earth. But unfortunately, it works against them and wreaks havoc in their marriage.

What in the world could that be?

Happiness: The Worst Value Ever

Over the past decades I had the chance to counsel quite a few people with relationship problems. When I reflect on what I heard, one things stands out the most: complaints about what the other partner did wrong and how much it made them unhappy.

Although in some cases the issues were really serious, I often sensed an unwillingness to work on a solution. It seemed easier to blame the other for making their lives miserable - or at least complicated - than putting real efforts into overcoming problems and building a working relationship.

Of course, that is easy to say if I only have to look at the problem from the outside and don't have to deal with it myself. But many relationship problems have in common that the partners - or at least one of them - put a very *high value on being happy* and comfortable. As soon as the other intrudes into their comfort zone by what he or she does or expects - and this is guaranteed to happen - they have a problem. But for them the problem is the outside; they have no part in it. And consequently they do not participate in its solution either, because they expect the other one to change and make them happy again.

These people have a serious misconception. They believe ``If I am not happy, something bad must be happening''. They view happiness as the essence of life. Many people, particularly younger and unexperienced ones, believe that happiness is all that counts in a relationship. They want to be happy with their partner - who doesn't want that, they want to make each other happy, and they expect that their partner always makes them happy.

And the latter is exactly the root of their problems. Making happiness one of our top priorities in life is about the worst thing we can do.

But wait a minute - doesn't our constitution grant us the right to pursue happiness? Of course it does. There is nothing bad about pursuing happiness. But that doesn't mean that we have the right to always *be* happy. Actually, *people who always want to be happy and pursue it above all else are some of the most miserable people in the world*. It is just the wrong attitude. The bible nowhere promises that we may enjoy happiness everyday but tells us that we have to accept going through difficult times if we want to follow Jesus **(Matthew 5:11-12, 11:29, 16:24)**. Why is this so?

If you always want to be happy, you avoid everything that makes you even temporarily unhappy. In your relationship you will shy away from issues that require you to work on yourself. You won't do the hard character work that is necessary for becoming mature and being content and joyful *in whatever circumstances* you find yourself **(Romans 5:3-5)**. And therefore you will seldomly content with what you have, what you do, where and how you live, the church you go to, the spouse you have, etc. There is always something negative that you see. You want to be happy, but you expect the outside to make you happy instead of resting in yourself. In the end it was your strife for happiness that made you so miserable, nothing else.

It is a natural consequence: *people who always want to be happy and pursue it above all else are some of the most miserable people in the world.*

So what is *happiness*? Why are some people happy in their relationships and others aren't? The answer is simple.

Happiness in itself is not bad, but it cannot be the foundation of a good marriage. Instead, it is a *result* of a good marriage. If you haven't figured it out yet, *marriage is*

work. A lot of work. Uncomfortable, hard work - because we need to work our way through all kinds of difficulties. Conflicts, fears, rejections, arguments, hurt feelings, and worst of all the disillusionment of your spouse being quite different from what you imagined.

You have to go through the difficult task of accepting imperfections and immaturities in the other person, while at the same time having to help her to overcome them. You have to realize that you yourself have imperfections and immaturities, that your spouse has the right and duty to point them out to you, and that you need to work on overcoming them.

All these things are quite normal and all of them are workable - if you are willing to work through them. Those couples who do that will eventually reach happiness again - a form of happiness that is deeper and better than they ever experienced before.

But those who hit these inevitable walls and have the attitude that the real problem is that their spouse ``interferes with their happiness'', are in real trouble. They will rather leave the relationship than undertake efforts to solve the issues. They don't see their unhappiness as a chance to grow, something that helps them reach a deeper relationship because God is about to remove some edges and thorns in their life.

The Bible tells us to accept difficult times with joy - because they are a chance to grow and to reach a new stage in your relationship that is deeper and closer than ever before.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds; because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
(James 1:2-4)

Some people find these verses difficult to accept. What good shall there be in difficulties? Shouldn't we be able to grow closer together and be happy all the time? Wouldn't I be much better off if I hadn't to go through all these difficulties? If life were easier, if we had no disagreements and no reason for arguments, no pain in our bodies, no financial worries but always plenty - wouldn't we be much happier together?

I doubt it, because that requires that *you* have to be perfect. You may believe you are, but you are certainly not. I know people who never honestly apologize to their spouse because they cannot admit that they were behaving wrong - but that is exactly the cause for their problem. Although in an abstract sense they know that they are still sinners, they fail to see the concrete situation where they sin and need to change.

A simple analogy might help to show how ridiculous this attitude is.

Imagine you just got your driver's license and a new car. It is fall, rains a lot

and you run into trees a few time. Nothing serious, but it causes trouble. Every other week you hit a tree. So you say to yourself ``Enough of this. This is a bad car. I hate it. It just keeps running into trees''. So you sell your car and buy a new one and hope to be happy from now on.

Sounds absurd, doesn't it. But that is exactly what people do who run away from a marriage once they hit a few too many difficulties. They don't see that they play a major part in that scenario. They believe dumping their spouse and getting a new one will solve their problem and make them happy again. They don't see that it is their own ``driving'' that they must improve. That they will only find happiness if they learn how to relate to another person. That they must see and acknowledge mistakes and learn to avoid, prevent, and grow out of them.

Many things are better to worry about than happiness. You should worry about the things that eventually *produce* happiness. You're not a child anymore, who wants to eat dessert first. So do not think that being happy *today* is all that matters. This is a self-centered and self-destructive attitude. If happiness is more important to you than growth, happiness will certainly elude you. But if you're willing to do the hard work of growth *now*, no matter how it feels, happiness will find you eventually.

Value 1: Love of God

What is it that holds a Christian couple together if everything else fails?

Young people often believe that *physical attraction* is the key, so they invest a lot into how they look. While making yourself attractive for your spouse is a sign of respect, our outer appearance is not what keeps us together. Otherwise we would be in deep trouble when we get older (and some people are quite afraid of that), because there will always somebody who looks much better that we do.

What about *love*? Love is an important ingredient and we will talk about it in the next section. When they start dating, most couples think that their love is so strong that it will overcome all obstacles. But after they get married and live close together day by day they realize that their love can fail as well. There are differences, struggles, arguments - sometimes so strong that their marriage appears to be totally hopeless. There is simply not enough love to hold the two together.

But there is one value that lasts. One that is stronger than all the differences and difficulties. One value that can keep a couple together when everything els has failed. And that is a *deep love for God*.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. ***(Matthew 22:37-38)***

When we look at our own marriage relationship we will quickly realize that we simply don't have the strength to keep it together ourselves. We try to overcome problems in our own strength and we fail. At some point, I believe, almost every marriage reaches a stage where neither of the spouses has the energy to address the problems that have accumulated. Sometimes they don't even have the desire to do that anymore. They feel like giving up.

At this point you may not be willing to make any changes in your life for your spouse. But when you truly love God, you are willing to make the changes that *he* wants you to make. And that will not only save your relationship but turn it into something better than ever before - because you finally realize that you need to let God take control of your marriage instead of trying it in your own strength.

Some people believe that loving God with respect to a failing relationship only means that we must not divorce.

``I hate divorce'', says the Lord God of Israel ***(Malachi 2:16)***.
They are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate ***(Matthew 19:6)***.

This is certainly true. God is against divorce, because he has joined the couple together in a way that cannot be fully separated anymore. *But God does not expect us to stick to a miserable relationship.*

Yes, we shall endure trials and not run away from them (remember James 1:2-4). But instead of sticking to something that is miserable, God wants us to change so that he can turn our relationship into something beautiful. And if we love God, *we will always make the adjustments he requires from us*. We may not do this for anybody else in the world, but we do it for God. As a consequence, we will grow and our relationship with grow with us. That is why our love for God is the most important value we can have.

I know that this is hard to believe, when you're *in* a bad situation. It just doesn't seem to work. But when God wants you to have a great relationship with your spouse, will he not also provide the means to get there?

And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But if you are tempted, he will also provide a way out, so that you can stand under it ***(1. Corinthians 10:13)***.

We have talked about many issues and immaturities that spouses may have to overcome in order to resolve conflicts. You may have to stop criticizing and judging your spouse for what he does wrong in your eyes **(Matthew 7:1,5)**. We may have to control your anger **(Ephesians 4:26)** instead of striking back if you're being judged.

You may have to learn to endure conflict and work through it instead of running away from it. You may have to learn to take responsibility for your feelings instead of blaming your spouse for them - your spouse is not responsible for your happiness!

I am not saying that overcoming troubles in a relationship is easy. It is not easy to realize that *I* have to change, and it is even more difficult to actually do it. But God provides the way to overcome the temptations that always want to lead me the wrong way. I only have to let him do that.

We have to learn that God is in charge of our marriage, not we. If we let him, a troubled relationship between us is always re-established through our bond with him. He empowers us to change; he tells us *how* to change. And the love between us will be the fruit of loving God.

But if we try to be the ones in charge, we'll do it our way and our own limitations will become limitations of our relationship as well. To make the changes we need to make we need someone bigger than ourselves to answer to.

Loving God first, with all our heart, mind, and soul is the key. Lose your life to him and you will gain it.

Value 2: Love of Your Spouse

Almost equally important for a growing relationship as your love for God is the love for your spouse.

And the second is like it: ``Love your neighbor as yourself'' ***(Matthew 22:39)***

It is easy to say that we love our wife or our husband. We all believe that we know what that means. But do we really know what love is?

To some people love is romance. To others it is a feeling of being secure in the other. To still others it is being attracted to something that the other possesses such as beauty, strength, achievement, or character. All these forms of love depend on what the other means *to us*, on something in the other person that gratifies *us* in some way. He or she adds to our existence.

This kind of love is certainly an important ingredient of a good relationship, but it is not the one that builds it. What happens when we don't see anymore ``what we love'' in our spouse. When she changes - does it mean our love will disappear? This is what many young people, particularly Non-Christians, are afraid of, when they think of marriage. What if the basis for our love goes away?

The answer to that is simple. True love, love that really builds a relationship, is something different - something that does not depend on how our partner is but solely on what our attitude towards our spouse is. It is the kind of love that God has for us.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us ***(Romans 5:8)***.

This form of love has nothing to do with whether the other is gratifying us at the moment. *It is a love that is concerned with the good for the other person.*

The Greek language has a way to distinguish between several kinds of love that many modern languages do not have anymore. They have three different words that cannot be confused with each other: $\phi\iota\lambda\eta$ (phile), the brotherly love, a feeling of mutual closeness and trust; $\epsilon\rho\sigma\varsigma$ (eros), the sensual love that has to do with physical attraction and intimate knowledge of the other; and $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\eta$ (agape), the love that reaches out to the other and is concerned with the best of that person.

All three forms of love have something beautiful in them and do belong to a healthy marriage. But the first two depend on who and how the other person is and what she triggers in us, while only the last - agape - is selfless enough to build a relationship.

Unfortunately, the English language knows only one word for three very different concepts and we have no clear understanding of what agape-love really means. So what does it mean to love your spouse as yourself? There are three aspects to it.

The first aspect is *Empathy*.

%3. *You identify with your spouse so deeply that you feel the effects of your behavior on her.*

When we do things that hurt a relationship, then selfishness is usually at the root. We simply do not think or care about how our behavior affects the other. And so we just do what you think best for ourselves.

But if we learn to see the world through the eyes of our spouse, we will feel the damage we're doing to her. And when we experience the pain that our behavior creates, we may ask ourselves whether we would like to be treated that way and find it easier to change our behavior. *Empathy*, that is identifying with another's experience, is a great help towards a more loving attitude.

Empathy, however, requires that both partners must learn to communicate feelings - and not just reactions to behavior. When your spouse hurts you - can you show what is going on inside you? The fear that his anger creates. The discouragement that her criticism generates. The frustration resulting from his

chronic lateness or the worries because of her overspending. We need to honestly show each other what is going on *inside* us - not just the surface (see also Section 8.5). Only then is it possible, that our spouse can feel what he or she is doing to us.

%3. *You think first of making your spouse's life better.*
Empathy enables us not only to see the negative consequences of our imperfections and sinful attitudes but also to become proactive and think of what would improve the situation our spouse is in.

If you had been at home alone or just with the kids all day, what would you like from your partner? How about some meaningful conversation? If you had been working hard all day, what would you like from your partner? How about some relief? Wouldn't that be good?

What about the bigger issues in life? How would you feel if you did not get an opportunity to develop your talents - wouldn't you want someone to give you the freedom and resources to do so? How would you feel if you had to work extra hours just to stay out of debt - wouldn't you appreciate if your spouse would spend the money wisely so that you don't have to worry?

Many marital arguments wouldn't have to take place if both partners had this kind of attitude. If each spouse would feel the other's needs as his or her own, they would work as a team to get these needs met. They would be willing to sacrifice to see that happen, and find joy in the happiness and fulfillment of the other.

Again, however, both spouses need to communicate how they feel about things. Your spouse may actually like things that you don't - so putting yourself in his shoes may not always lead to an accurate understanding of the situation. If you get to know each other, you will learn to feel like your spouse feels.

%3. *You want the best for your spouse even when she can't see what that is.*

The most difficult aspect of loving your spouse is wanting the best for her even if she doesn't see what that is. What your spouse needs may not always be what she wants. She may need a confrontation to make her aware of sinful behavior. He may need to be put into treatment for an addiction, even if he doesn't like that at all. There may be a need for spiritual growth and you may have to invest energy, time, and attention to bring your spouse closer to God. or your spouse may need a relief from duties, which means you have to shoulder some of her workload or get a job to reduce his burdens. The key concept here is that it has to be done for the *benefit* of the other.

This kind of love may cost you. It may be very difficult for you. But loving your spouse as yourself means that you want it as desperately as you would want it for yourself.

There is more to agape-love than just empathy. True love also comes with a concept of *commitment*, a promise that cannot be broken. God's attitude towards his children is clearly expressed in **Hebrews 13:5**:

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.

To commit yourself to your spouse means you will not desert her nor leave her, no matter how difficult things get. Leaving is not an option for you. Why is this so important?

If you're not committed to marriage, you are tempted to leave, when difficulties come up. Avoidance is the easier way out - why go through the pain and labor of working through the difficulty? Even if you don't physically, you may leave emotionally and thus forsake your relationship.

But problems in a marriage are usually a sign that both partners need to change and grow. If you leave, you miss an important opportunity. But if you hang in there and go through the necessary changes, you will receive great rewards. The problem is that you don't see that before you actually get there. Your commitment is the only thing that keeps you going.

You may compare a marriage to a marathon run or a strenuous mountain hike. When my wife and I first tried to hike Mt. Elbert in Colorado, we were all excited when we got started. The weather was perfect and the hike wasn't as difficult as we expected. But once we hit 14,000 foot altitude, hiking became increasingly strenuous. We had to inch our way up to the summit and stop every 200 feet. Several times we were ready to give up - why go through the strain and walk on? But we wanted to reach the top, so our commitment kept us going. And it was worth it. The view from the summit was breathtaking. If we had given up half an hour earlier, it would have been much better if we had not started to climb at all.

Marriage problems can also be compared to some deep surgery that one has to go through. Imagine a surgery without commitment - how long would a patient survive who leaves in the middle of a bypass surgery? And what would be his chances if he stays? God sometimes has to perform surgery that saves our relationship - but we must be committed to let him finish.

Commitment also provides a necessary ingredient for growth and that is *security*. Without security, your spouse will always fear that you leave if he doesn't meet your expectations. And this fear will give way to a whole host of problems that prevent growth in your relationship.

Some people believe that too much security takes the excitement out of a marriage. ``He doesn't have to make any efforts anymore to keep me'', is what they think. Some even toy with the threat of leaving if their spouses don't satisfy all their wishes. Such an approach may work for a while to get some selfish desires fulfilled, but it will

certainly destroy the marriage relationship. If you take away the security, your spouse will never trust you enough to build a deep relationship.

Commitment provides both the need for growth in yourself and the security for your spouse to grow. You want to be together for life, and your commitment helps you to work things out.

Empathy and commitment must be accompanied by a third component: *action.*

Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead ***(James 2:17)***.

Love is not just a process that goes on inside you. The love that makes a marriage grow is the love that brings action into a relationship. A love that puts all the above into practice. That is the only way your spouse can see it.

Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do
(James 2:18).

You can talk about your feelings and your love for your spouse all day long. But if it is not accompanied by action your spouse will have a hard time believing you. You also need to show your love by what you do.

Think of the time when you first dated. How hard did you work to express your love. You had hundreds of ideas to show your spouse-to-be how much you appreciated her. Now that the knot has been tied, don't take her for granted. Jesus warns us about letting our love towards God grow cold:

I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen. Repent, and do the things you first did
(Revelation 2:4-5a).

True love doesn't allow itself to grow cold. If it has done so, it is time to rekindle the flame. Take some time just for each other - without children, relatives, and friends - and start dating again. Begin to make plans where you want your marriage to go. And don't waste any thought on why this should be impossible or that your stupid husband will ruin it anyway. Rather think about what it takes to get there and lay out the next step you both should go. Do this regularly. You may have to invest into a babysitter and let go of other things that usually occupy your evenings - your marriage is certainly worth it.

Love is the foundation for marriage: both love for God and love for your spouse. Make love your highest priority in your marriage and it will pay you back much more than you ever thought possible.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.
(1. Corinthians 13:4-8a)

None of us is able to live this description of love completely. But we can try and see that love will serve as powerful boundary against all kinds of evil influences on your marriage. It will protect marriage and give you much in return for what you invest in its enduring power.

Value 3: Compassion and Forgiveness

During our days of courtship, we tend to have an idealized picture of our future spouse. She is the perfect person, not only beautiful in her appearance but also lovely in character. He is so strong and considerate, the man who would do everything to keep you from harm.

But how long did it take you to find out, that even that ideal person is far from perfect? He fails you in areas that are really important to you. She says things to you that really hurt you. And that happens over and over again.

Let's face it. The person that you love the most and have committed your life to is *not* perfect. Your spouse is guaranteed to fail you and hurt you in many ways, some of them quite serious. That is our nature as human beings as the Bible clearly states:

There is no one righteous, not even one ***(Psalm 14:3 / Romans 3:10)****.*
There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins
(Ecclesiastes 7:20)
If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us ***(1. John 1:8)****.*

Your spouse is no exception from that rule and it hurts even more because she is so close to you and you love her so much. But what can you do when your wife has a weakness, failure, or inability to do something that she should do? What happens when your husband fails you and proves to be much less than you wish him to be?

What can you do?

Ignore the problem, as if it weren't there? Beat him up for his imperfections and nag him every day? We know that this doesn't help your relationship.

The Bible offers us a better solution

Love covers over a multitude of sins ***(1. Peter 4:8)***

Nothing can permanently damage a relationship if love is in the picture. There is no hurt that love cannot heal, no failure that is larger than grace. *Love never fails* you **(1. Corinthians 13:8a)**. But for these miracles to take place you need to have and attitude of compassion and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the opposite of perfectionism - you give up your demands for your spouse to be perfect. You accept that he is inferior to the standard right now. Right now you may be in a *stronger position* - but you realize that you are not morally superior. Remember that you are not perfect, too. Even God never uses his stronger position to hurt us when we fail him, but always to help, so we should do the same.

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity ***(Colossians 3:12b-14)***.

How many marriages could be healed if we would wear compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience whenever our spouses fail and hurt us?

``But wait a minute", some people might say at this point. ``Doesn't that mean I enable his misbehavior? Why should I forgive when he hurts me so much?"

That though is quite human, but also quite wrong. As humans we tend to harden our hearts when we are hurt or offended. Our spouse should know that what he did was wrong, so we punish him until he comes crawling back to us.

Unfortunately, that doesn't work at all. In fact, our *hardness of heart* is more destructive for our relationship that the failure that we cannot forgive. Failings can be overcome - but hardness of heart is a true relationship killer. Jesus said that that hardness of heart is the only reason why there is divorce at all **(Matthew 19:8)**. If our hearts were tender and compassionate, it wouldn't come to that.

Much more can be said about the importance of forgiveness and what it means for us. From a practical perspective, forgiveness involves a number of issues

%3. *An identification with sin and failure.*

You need to have an attitude of humility toward your spouse's failure. Keep in mind that you constantly fail her as well. Remember **1. John 1:8**: if you believe that you are above sin, you simply deceive yourself. But if you are aware of your own sins, it will easier for you to have grace for your spouse's.

%3. *An identification with weakness.*

Hardheartedness often comes from a desire to avoid pain. You only see the hurt that your spouse's weakness causes *you* and try to avoid it. But you do not see the struggles that she is going through nor that she is in desperate need of your help to overcome this weakness.

If you identify with your spouse's weakness, you will become a partner in the healing and strengthening process and strengthen the bond between the two of you.

%3. *A willingness to repent.*

Forgiveness and compassion come from the injured party. She sets you free after you have sinned against her. But without repentance on behalf of the person who failed, closeness and trust is difficult to reestablish.

If you want your relationship to grow closer, you must be willing to admit failure, accept full responsibility for it, and show a true change of heart - you honestly want to change. Without that, your spouse can hardly open himself up to you, because you have not yet shown to be trustworthy again. You don't have to be perfect to earn his trust again, but you have to let him see that you are truly going to try.

%3. *A willingness to become vulnerable again.*

People who have been hurt severely often built up a wall of protection around themselves in order to make themselves invulnerable. This strategy might have been helpful at some stage in their lives, but it keeps them from having closeness with their spouse.

If your spouse, who has hurt you, is truly repentant and can be trusted, then you must open up and become vulnerable again - although you know that he will hurt you again in some way.

Compassion, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness ensure that imperfect people can experience love and long-lasting relationships. Without these qualities, a distance between the two of you will grow quickly. But if you clothe yourself with them, the bond between you will become stronger and stronger.

Value 4: Honesty

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist
(Ephesians 6:14a).

Another important value for a close relationship is honesty. We need to know the truth about each other. In a marriage relationship there is no space for lies, not even small ones, because deceptions destroy trust and raises doubts: ``Can I really believe what my husband is telling me? Or do I have to check everything he says?" If you're not truthful about some issues, how can your spouse know that she can trust you in others?

Couples who do not put a high value on honesty deceive each other in many ways. Sometimes spouses lie over small things like spending too much. At other times they lie about serious things, such as affairs. Our human nature tempts us to lie about problems, about things that we are ashamed of, when we are afraid if disappointing our partner, or when we fear that the truth could have negative consequences for us. But anything, no matter how small or how big, can be forgiven and worked through in a relationship.

But deception damages our relationship much more than the things that we lie about. It is the one thing that cannot be worked through because it denies the problem. It makes forgiveness unattainable.

Couples should aim at total honesty. But honesty must be coupled with the other values that we discuss in this chapter **(Ephesians 4:15)**. Honesty without love can be brutal and wreck your relationship. Honesty without forgiveness is almost impossible - how can we be honest to a partner who always punishes us and never forgives? Honesty without a commitment to holiness doesn't leave much space for hope that the problem will not reoccur.

There are some areas that couples find difficult to be honest about.

%3. Feelings and desires, likes and dislikes
%3. Needs and vulnerabilities
%3. Hurts and disappointments
%3. Anger and hatred
%3. Sins and failure
%3. Finances
%3. Sex

There are plenty of reasons why we are dishonest in these areas. We may fear being misunderstood and rejected if we talk about feelings and desires. We may have experienced that knowledge about our vulnerabilities has been used against us and do not dare our spouse to be different. We may suppress anger because we believe it is wrong to show anger. We have never learned to be honest about sexual desires and problems because ``one does not talk about such things" and our religious upbringing taught us that any form of sexual desire is wrong anyway.

But if we're not honest about these issues, we do not give our spouse the chance to know who we really are. Our spouse has the right to know our soul, our innermost feelings - even the negative ones. That is the level where the most intimate connection takes place. That is the level where we really become close to each other.

I know that most men do not find it easy to share feelings. We do not want to show our dark side or weakness. We want to be the strong and good one - the provider and protector, not the one who needs help. So we swallow disappointments, hide frustration, cover up failures and weaknesses, hoping that this would protect our relationship. But because of such barriers to honesty, intimate knowledge between us and our spouse is ruled out and falsehood takes over. Couples often live out years of falsehood trying to protect and save their relationship, not realizing that by doing so they destroy any chance for a real relationship. This is not how God wants us to live

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body ***(Ephesians 4:25)***.

It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to share with our spouse our deepest feelings, needs, hurts, desires, failures and whatever else is on our soul. If both partners can feel safe enough in their marriage to be totally vulnerable, then their marriage can return to a state of paradise where there is true intimacy without a need for fig leaves.

In most cases, deception in a marriage takes place because the dishonest spouse tries to protect himself. The fact that fear drives the deception does not excuse it, but complicates matters. Before spouses can tell the whole truth, they must deal with their fear. Common fears are

%3. Fear of real closeness and being known completely
%3. Fear of abandonment and loss of love if the spouse really knows them
%3. Fear of being judged, controlled, or taken advantage of
%3. Fear of being seen as bad or not good enough if some weakness or failure is known
%3. Fear of their own desires, needs, and feelings

Dealing with these fears may require you to work out the deeper issues that get in the way. This is a topic by itself that cannot be fully addressed here. But there are certain things you can do to increase honesty in your marriage.

%3. *Promise that you will never punish your spouse for being honest*. That doesn't mean that there will be no consequences, but punishment, shame, and condemnation will not be part of them.

%3. *Permit each other to question you and check out things.* Do not be offended when your spouse tries to understand some facts that don't add up. That doesn't mean she doesn't trust you - she just needs to understand you fully.
%3. *Admonish each other when you see that your spouse is not being honest.* This can be done in a harmless and even funny way, but you need to hold each other to the truth so that deception won't creep in slowly.
%3. *Help your spouse in healing the underlying fears of being honest.* If he fears abandonment, show him that you stand by him no matter what he does and says and that you are not going to treat him like whoever abandoned him before.
%3. *Take responsibility for your own dishonesty and fears and make a commitment to resolving.* Find a friend besides your spouse who will hold you accountable. Get a friend to help you tell the truth when you are afraid of doing that alone.
%3. *Use discernment - some truths are not ready to be dealt with yet.* Your spouse may be too fragile at the time or in special circumstances. To bring up a difficult truth might not be wise right now - but don't use that as an excuse never to tell the truth. Use wisdom to know what your relationship can handle and check out additional resources such as counseling, friends, or healing that may be needed for honesty to work.

If you want to build a strong relationship, make a commitment to each other of total honesty. But remember that honesty must be accompanied by grace, love, and forgiveness to hear and deal with the truth it brings. If you value honesty highly, it will pay you back many times.

Value 5: Faithfulness

Another thing you do: you flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask ``why?''. It is because the LORD is acting as a witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. ***(Malachi 2:13-14)***

Faithfulness is one of the most misunderstood values in a marriage. Especially in religious circles, our notion of faithfulness is often too shallow. We generally think only of the sexual realm - and believe to be faithful as long as we don't sleep with someone other than our spouse. But even when we are faithful with our bodies, we may not be faithful with our hearts.

So what is faithfulness?

%3. *Trust* in each other
%3. *Confidence* in each other
%3. Being *assured* of each other's character and dependability **(Deuteronomy 23:21-23)**
%3. Allowing each other to be certain of one's *fidelity*
%3. *Convincing* each other of one's trustworthiness

%3. Being *true* to each other
%3. Being *certain* of each other
%3. Being *permanent* to each other
%3. *Resting* in each other

All these descriptions hint at what faithfulness really is.*A faithful spouse is one who can be trusted, depended upon, and believed in and one in whom you can rest.*

Faithfulness means that your partner can depend on you in all the ways listed above, not just in the physical realm. You can be depended upon to do what you promised and to follow through on what has been entrusted to you. You do your chores faithfully **(Matthew 25:19-21)**, you stay within the agreed budget, you pay your bills in time, you come home when you said you will, you make necessary appointments and keep them, you share your life - without fear of reprisal or condemnation, and of course you are sexually faithful as well. Your spouse can be so confident in you that she does not have to worry about anything that she entrusted you with.

Faithfulness, of course, also means that you will not stray from the one you love. An affair begins in your heart.

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ***(Matthew 5:28)***

Faithfulness doesn't mean that you cannot have deep, sustaining, and supportive emotional relationships with other people. Good friends can help you to feel safer, learn to trust more, heal an old emotional wound, and thus eventually get closer to your spouse. Spending a reasonable amount of time away with friends and from your spouse has nothing to do with unfaithfulness,

However, when you take aspects of yourself and intentionally keep them away from your marriage, then you have become unfaithful to your spouse. If you spend more time and energy on a hobby or on maintaining a friendship than on your marriage, if your work or some addiction becomes more important to you than your spouse, if your children have preference over your husband, or your relatives over your wife - then something has come between you and your spouse and makes you disconnect from your relationship. This is what unfaithfulness is about.

Unfaithfulness commonly occurs in a marriage where there is conflict or a need for growth and one partner does not like to deal with the issues. To avoid the conflict - and the spouse - this partner tries to find relief in some ``outside'' relationship such as other people, work, hobbies, an addiction, or even sicknesses.

Quite often, the unfaithful spouse will justify his unfaithfulness by the other's failures of love. While this may indeed be the case, it is a lame excuse for unfaithfulness.

Your unfaithfulness will always be *your* sin, not your spouse's - no matter what she did or did not do to you.

He will never leave you nor forsake you ***(Deuteronomy 31:6b)***.
If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself
(2. Timothy 2:13).

God does not become unfaithful if we do. In the same way our marriage requires us to remain faithful no matter what your spouse does. Do not let your spouse's failures become an excuse for unfaithfulness. Make a commitment to each other that you will not allow anything to come between you two. You will be dependable, trustworthy, and emotionally and sexually faithful.[5]

If you struggle with wanting to take some part of yourself to something or someone other than your spouse, find out why. If it is something that you do together with friends because your spouse has no interest in it, this could be perfectly okay. What is not okay is to let some lust keep your heart away from your spouse and bring it somewhere else.

Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life
(Revelation 2:10c).

Value 6: Holiness

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured posession. ***(Deuteronomy 7:6)***.
Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness ***(2. Peter 3:11)***.
Who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace ***(2. Timothy 1:9)***.
For God did not call us to be impore, but to live a holy life
(1. Thessalonians 4:7).

Holiness - what goes through your mind when you hear this word?

Do you think of romance or having fun? Or does it sound stiff and boring to you, somewhat like the feeling a child has in a very old and majestic church building?

In reality, holiness is something very attractive for marriage. Holiness is one of the essential characteristics of God and therefore one of the essential of life. Holiness has

nothing to do with religious formalities or ancient rituals - it is what keeps us close to the God-given reality of life.

Be holy, because I am holy ***(Leviticus 11:44b)***.

To be holy means to be pure and blameless **(2. Timothy 2:21)**. In a marriage that places a high value on holiness, the following would be present

%3. *Confession and ownership* of problems in each individual
%3. A relentless drive towards growth and development
%3. A giving up of everything that gets in the way of *love*
%3. Surrender of everything that gets in the way of *truth*
%3. *Pure hearts* that do not allow anything toxic to grow

If we make these issues one of our top priorities, we can heal anything that currently burdens our marriage. How great would it be if both marriage partners would strive for holiness. There would be almost no more need for counseling as the marriage would begin to heal itself.

It is important that holiness is seen as a value by itself and not as a means to get something. If you strive for holiness only to make someone look favorably at you, then you will stop all your efforts if you don't get what you want.

This situation often occurs in relationships between a Christian and a Non-Christian. God explicitly warns of such unbalanced relationships, because Christians and Non-Christians have little in common.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers ***(2. Corinthians 6:14)***.

Being painfully aware of this, the Christian partner often hopes that the other one will make a profession of faith so that the two can marry. Sometimes she even makes clear that she cannot continue the relationship as long as he is not a Christian.

Now suppose, he doesn't want to lose her. What will be his driving force when he strives for committing his life to Christ? Is is really a desire to get right with God? Is it really full repentance, out of a hunger for righteousness? Or is it just an attempt to keep her?

The only way to find out is to terminate that relationship as God commands it *without* promising that the two will get together again once he is a Christian. He must turn his life over to Christ for his own sake - because he realizes that he is a sinner and needs salvation - not as a means to win her back. Only when he accepts the fact that she may

never be his wife even if he does become a Christian, his conversion will really be genuine. He must put his own growth and not other desires first - that is what holiness is about.

Holiness means that you become the kind of person who can produce love and trust. You become whole in God, honest, faithful, and loving. In a marriage, this is anything but stiff or boring - it is a kind of purity and trustworthiness from which the deepest kinds of passion flow.

Epilogue

Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like ***(James 1:22-24)***

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who focus on what they want, always desire it but never attain it; and those who focus on what it takes to *obtain* what they want, do the work, make sacrifices, delay gratification, and ultimately get the rewards of their work.

If you focus on what you want and desire in your marriage and are disappointed and angry that you don't get it, then you will stay exactly there: angry and disappointed. But if you focus on cultivating your marriage, you will reap a huge harvest.

In the same way you should treat the values that we have discussed. Work on them and cultivate them. Stand against anything in yourself - and in your spouse - that would destroy them. Do everything that increases their presence. Your marriage depends on that.

Invest time, money, energy, and other resources to develop the things that truly count: love of God and our spouse, honesty, faithfulness, forgiveness, and holiness. Pursue them with everything you can muster, and they will not fail you in the end.

Resolving Conflicts in Marriage

Every marriage has to face conflicts. Conflicts may arise from the outside when we allow external intruders to interfere with our marriage or from the inside, just because we are different from each other. The difference between a good and a bad marriage is

not, whether conflicts are present, but how we proceed to resolve them. The following chapters look at various kinds of external and interal conflicts as well as at ways to resolve conflicts.

Protecting Marriage from Outside Intruders

Many married couples experience that their relationship changes over time. During the first years of the relationship, they had spent many evenings just talking with each other. They wanted to share joys, hurts, and hearts. There was a closeness between the two of them that just made them want to get to know one another more and more. Both were sure that they had found the soul mate they had been longing for.

But as the relationship progresses, the constraints of everyday life seem to take control of their marriage: children, career, friends & relatives, church, - all very good in themselves, but in the end a burden for the marriage. Suddenly the couple has to realize that their relationship revolves more around such things and people than around each other. The closeness between the two seems to have disappeared and although both spouses realize how much they suffer from that, they have no idea how to deal with the emptiness that has crept into their marriage.

The outside affects the relationship

The situation that I just described is more common that we may wish to believe and cannot be solved by putting the blame on the other spouse. Quite often *both* partners have the feeling that they are the only ones who invest into the marriage while the other one just goes after his or her own interests. But that is not necessarily the case. Even if both spouses try to make their marriage work, they may feel an increasing distance between each other.

How can this be?

The answer is simpler than we may want to realize: we let the outside intrude into our marriage. Not on purpose, of course. It just happens ...because we do not protect our marriage *actively*.

We may believe that as long as we don't break out of our marriage, nothing bad may enter into it. But this is not so. There are many things in the world that compete for our love, and sometimes these forces are so strong that they get between us and our mate and diminish our relationship. Here are a few examples of such intruders.

%3. Work
%3. Children
%3. Outside hobbies and interests
%3. Sports

%3. In-laws
%3. Friends
%3. Church
%3. Financial involvements
%3. Television
%3. Internet
%3. Computer games
%3. Shopping
%3. Illness
%3. Addictions
%3. Affairs

Most of these aren't bad in themselves, but the can be destructive for a relationship, when they come between a couple's love. The pressures, temptations and even genuinely good opportunities coming from the outside are limitless. They don't wait for invitation to intrude into our marriage - they show up by themselves.

If we want to prevent that from happening, we must become active and protect our marriage. We have to recognize the dangers and put up well balanced boundaries, *before* these things come between us and our spouse. We need to learn to say no to them, before they have become so strong, that we can't seem to fend them off anymore. We must learn to work diligently but to say no to excessive demands of our boss at work, as they will grow if we give in to them too often. We have to teach limits to our children, so that they learn to respect our need to spend time without them. We have to learn to honor our parents while still being able to say no to to them. Whatever or whoever we're dealing with - we have to make clear that only one human being can have top priority in our life. And that is our spouse. The later we start that, the more difficult it will be ...but it is never too late to start.

This is not just a recommendation that comes from experience. It is a command from God.

They are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate ***(Matthew 19:6)***.

We must guard our marriage, so that the outside world cannot separate it. We must protect its core - the love between husband and wife. This doesn't come for free - it will cost us a lot. But our marriage is only as strong as what we invest into it.

In the previous chapter we talked about values and that we will only get what we value highly. If we do not put a very high value on what will make our marriage grow, then other influences will take over. But if we invest into our marriage and spend time, effort, and sacrifice in protecting our marriage from such influences, the chances for (eventually) having a rock solid marriage are quite high.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. ***(Matthew 13:45-46)***.

The merchant in this parable shows us what our attitude towards our relationship should be. It is a pearl that we treasure so highly that we ``forsake all others'', as many weddings vows say. This is not easy. We pay a high price to preserve it, but we know it is much more worth than what we pay for it.

Marriage is designed to be an exclusive club, a two-person arrangement that provides a safe place for each spouse's soul. There is no space for a third party to receive an equal share in a marriage, because that can easily disrupt the safety of the relationship.

With a third party present, our love gets divided. A part of our heart is taken away from our spouse, where it belongs, and brought to an outside source. For instance:

%3. a wife may tell her best friend how unhappy she is with her husband's behavior but - out of misunderstood submission - doesn't let him know her feelings,
%3. a husband may be more invested in his parents than in his wife,
%3. a spouse makes her child a confidant and becomes closer to it than to her mate.

Such situations seldomly arise out of bad intentions but nevertheless betray the trust between the spouses and fracture the union that God had intended to develop in the marriage. *Triangulation*, as such situations are called, is painful and unjust, because a third party receives what is due to your spouse. Your spouse never hears from you what you tell others about him. God hates the deception and indirectness of triangulation - because it is honesty and love that build a marriage, not the recommendations of outsiders.

...and a gossip separates close friends ***(Proverbs 16:28)***.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ ***(Ephesians 4:15)***

Of course, we all need close friends in whom we can confide and who confide in us. But if that drives us away from our spouse, we certainly stepped over the line. Conversely, if you find yourself in the situation where a friend confides in you but not in her spouse, be aware of the dangers of that situation. In spite of your good

intentions and willingness to help, you may actually drive the couple apart if you don't insist that your friend talks to her spouse first.

Married love requires a great deal of safety for true intimacy to grow, as it brings out the most vulnerable and fragile parts of our personality. Where there is safety, we can come out of our isolation and self-centeredness and work together on our individual weaknesses. But with a third party involved, there is not enough safety for these parts to emerge and the bond between the two spouses cannot grow stronger.

Saying no to others - whether to people, things, or tasks - is not easy. Sometimes it is hard work, causes anxiety, and may upset others. But in order to say *yes* to your marriage, you must be able to say *no* to other things. You simply do not have the time, resources, and energy to do everything you want and to please everyone around you. If you do not learn to say *no* to others, you will eventually find out that you have been saying *no* to your marriage all the time.

Marriage involves more than keeping the love between you and your spouse alive. It also means forsaking, or leaving behind other things.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh ***(Genesis 2:24)***.

This is not easy. Many newlyweds feel disheartened to find that they have to say *no* to so many things to maintain their marriage. Before they got married, they could take care of career, friends, sports, trips, and other activities. But now they restricted by their marriage and they almost resent their partner for this.

But marriage is not an extension of singleness, where you take your spouse along. It takes time to build the connection between the two of you - a lot of time - and this time has to be taken away from others. Marriage means forsaking some freedom in order to gain growth. You can't have both at the same time. If you don't make forsaking a part of everyday life, you always run danger of adding the wrong thing (bad influences) to your marriage and subtracting the good (closeness and honesty) from it. All ``intruder problems'' are ultimately caused by either of the two or both.

When the outside is not an intruder

Keeping third parties out of our marriage does of course not mean that we should spend all of our time only with our spouse and that any outside relationship and activity is ``bad'' or an act of disloyalty. Marriage was designed by God as a union between a man and a woman that leads to a more meaningful and fruitful life. Our spouse is our prime address for finding comfort, help, truth and growth.

But marriage is not the *only* place for that. It was never designed to be the source for all life for us. That would be idolatry, because only God and his resources are our life source.

He is before all things and in him all things hold together ***(Colossians 1:17)***.

The marriage bond is only one of many ways in which God provides for our needs. Marriages in which one spouse is the sole source of support for the other often end up in a parent-child dynamic. One spouse demands that the other functions as the parent she never had. The other attempts to do that out of a misconception what marriage is really about. But eventually he feels drained and resentful and then the ``child'' spouse feels abandoned and unloved.

In some marriages both spouses ``parent'' each other in different ways - for instance she is the only emotional contact for her husband and in turn he takes over all the financial and business aspects of their lives. This may look like a good arrangement, but taken to such an extreme it is not healthy at all. In Section 7 we talked about the need for both spouses to grow into complete and mature adults. Parenting your spouse prevents her from becoming that.

Marriage simply does not have all the resources that a couple needs. We also need close friends who can meet some of our needs. We can receive the love, structure, and approval we need also from those who have God's interests and values in their hearts.

For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother ***(Matthew 12:50)***.

In the end we have to learn to avoid extremes and find the right balance. We need outside relationships and activities to get some of our needs met that our spouse simply cannot meet. But at the same time we have to make sure that these external influences do not intrude into our marriage and take a part of our heart away from our spouse.

What promotes intruders?

Usually, intruders do not show up unexpectedly. They are a sign of some deeper issues in the marriage. They are the fruit, not the cause of the problem. Even affairs don't simply happen to a marriage that was healthy until ``the other'' showed up.

Quite often, other things or people intrude into our marriage when we experience some form of struggle in our marriage. It is not that they haven't been there all the time, but now we are more willing to allow them to come between us and our spouse. When a marriage contains conflict or hurt, we tend to busy ourselves in other people and activities, because that is less painful than facing some seemingly unsolvable problem at home day after day. The problem does not go away, but activity anesthetizes the deficits and pain and seems to fill the vacuum within us.

There are, of course, other possible reasons for intruders in our marriage. Most of them have to do with weaknesses in our character, which become more apparent as the intimacy between us and our spouse grows.

Thus before we deal with the with the specific intruders, that is the symptoms, we have to bring the real issues, which promote the presence of intruders in our marriage, to light and deal with them first. Let us look at some of the most common issues.

A natural consequence of intimacy

The very nature of emotional intimacy can become one of the reasons for vulnerability to outside intruders. Intimacy means that you get to know your spouse as he really is, with all his strengths and weaknesses, positive characteristics and faults, sins, and imperfections. Because there is no need for barriers, you are the one person who is allowed to see it all. And you will discover many aspects of his personality that you have never anticipated during courtship. Even worse, you will discover some negative traits that you would have never believed to have in your own personality and your spouse has to suffer from them.

Negative traits, by definition, are hard to live with. When you discover them, you will face a new kind of challenge: you have to accept yourself and your spouse as both of you are right now and learn to overcome your negative traits together. That, among other things, is what it means to hold together in good times as well as in bad ones.

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. ***(1. Corinthians 13:7-8a)***

But if you are not yet able to deal with such shocking new discoveries, the growing intimacy between you and your spouse makes your marriage vulnerable to two threats.

First of all, noticing your own weaknesses and imperfections can be a frightening experience. This fear may have many causes, such as

%3. Fear of being rejected by your spouse for your flaws
%3. Fear of feeling increasingly inadequate or like a total failure
%3. Fear of having to admit dependency and need for help
%3. Guilt that you may be draining your spouse by your problems

Fear, as we have mentioned so often, is the opposite of love.

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. ***(1. John 4:18)***

If you are burdened by such fears, chances are that you will distance yourself emotionally from your spouse. But distance creates a breach in the trust relationship and this will give intruders an opportunity to get between you and your spouse. Your fear causes you to take a part of your heart away from your spouse and devote it to something or someone else. But that only increases your distance and your fears will by no means be lessened - they are just covered up for a while.

The second threat has to do with discovering the flaws and imperfections of your spouse. Ideally, your love grows along with the relationship and the increased openness will be accompanied by increased grace, compassion, and forgiveness.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ``Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?'' Jesus answered, ``I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times'' ***(Matthew 18:21-22)***.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven ***(Luke 6:37)***.

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says ``I repent'', forgive him ***(Luke 17:3-4)***.

But you may not be ready to handle the negative sides of your spouse for several reasons. For instance

%3. you may want your spouse to be stronger than he really is, *Weaknesses*
%3. you may be disappointed in his imperfections *Failings*
%3. you may not be able to tolerate living with a sinner *Sins*
%3. you may only accept positive emotions *Negative feelings*
%3. your spouse's faults may remind you of your own *Aspects of yourself*

If you lack compassion and forgiveness, you may begin to distance yourself from your spouse when you experience his negative sides. You react to his problems by passing judgment on him and pulling away emotionally, which in turn will allow third parties to step in between you two.

In both cases it is not the imperfection itself that causes the problem, but your inability to deal with the growing intimacy between you and your spouse. Whether you can't accept your own imperfections or those of your spouse, your withdrawal is a threat to the integrity of your connection.

The only solution to this problem is to take responsibility for the issue and begin to reconnect. You may have to admit your fear to your spouse. Quite often you will find

out that your fears had little to do with reality. In other cases admitting them to your mate may warm his heart toward you and reduce your distance. Or you may have to deal with your own condemning spirit and realize how much your spouse is hurt by your withdrawal when he does ``something wrong''. And then you can work on both of your problems together.

Either way, it is very helpful if a couple learns signaling to each other when one feels that either love and truth are not present. If you are too scared to show some negative truth to your spouse, you may have to talk about this fear first. When you are sure of the love and compassion of your spouse, it is much easier to go into the truth. On the other hand, if your spouse appears distant to you, you may have to invite him to let you know what is going on. When you are sure that your spouse is completely honest with you, it will be easier to connect in love.

Not knowing your limits

Another common reason for the presence of intruders in a marriage is that one or both of the spouses may not be aware of their own limitations. They may care a lot for each other, but nevertheless spend a lot of time and energy on other things. The do want to be involved with their spouse - just not right now. They actually believe that there will be plenty of time for taking care of their spouse ...later, but they do not realize that their resources are limited. So the moment for being involved with their spouse never comes, at least not often enough.

As so often, the problem has not just to do with the ``limitless'' spouse, who jeopardizes the marriage by giving too much room to the outside world. It also has to do with the people who enable this kind of behavior and protect him from seeing the natural consequences of his actions. All too often there has been someone else who picked up the pieces, first the parents, later friends and co-workers, and eventually his spouse. Why should he become anxious about his growing marriage problems? After all, hasn't there always been a happy ending to all situations he encountered?

A person who has lived with a world of human safety nets often has one of the following convictions.

%3. nothing bad will happen if he doesn't get to fulfill his responsibilities,
%3. if something bad happens, nobody would really be affected,
%3. if someone is really bugged about it, someone else will bail him out and all is forgiven and forgotten.

In the end, he won't be anxious about anything - there will be a good end to everything. This ``don't worry - be happy'' attitude makes him quite careless and the marriage will suffer from that.

A while ago we have talked a lot about the law of sowing and reaping (see Section 4.1): actions always have consequences.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature from that nature will reap destruction ***(Galatians 6:7-8)***.

But the careless spouse doesn't realize that he is sowing destruction, because someone else carries the consequences for him. He overcommits his time, she comes to his rescue and organizes his schedule. He overspends, she figures out how to get them out of trouble again. She is the one who suffers - not he. The intruders win and the couple loses.

A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again ***(Proverbs 19:19)***.

There is only one way out. Stop rescuing your spouse over and over again. Let him face the consequences of his action - the angry people and missed deadlines. That won't be easy in the beginning, but eventually he will become more realistic, see how much you have done for him in the past, and start investing more time and energy into what is really valuable, that is your relationship.

A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool ***(Proverbs 17:10)***.

Taking the marriage for granted

A closely related issue is that one or both of the partners may not be aware of the fragility of marriage. They adopt the mentality that everything is o.k. as long as no major crises are going on. In a sense, they take the marriage for granted and do not work on it unless they are really in trouble.

This is a very immature perspective of the institution of marriage. Marriage can go a long time before you feel the influence of intruders getting between the two of you. You will hardly notice how you drift slowly from a deep connection into a comfortably numb one ...until you suddenly realize that something very important has been lost. You are not inside each other's hearts anymore because other things have occupied them.

Marriage does not start at the wedding and goes on forever all by itself. It needs to be worked on day by day! And it will be only as good as the investment you make in it. You either grow and deepen the connection to your spouse, or your marriage will start to deteriorate.

There is no such thing as an ``out of the blue'' marriage problem. Statements like ``everything was fine until he suddenly became abusive'' or ``our marriage was good until I found out about the affair'' are far away from reality. When a marriage deteriorates, there are always warning signs such as

%3. increasing withdrawal
%3. unresolved differences from which the couple simply walks away
%3. preferences for others to meet needs that the marriage used to meet
%3. interests and relationships that your spouse does not talk about

In **Romans 6:15** Paul warns us not to take our freedom in Christ for granted.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!

We can't go on as before just because we are saved. In the same way you should not take your marriage for granted, but regularly take time to talk about the aspects of your relation that need improvement. As in your annual physical you want to make sure that you address the real issues: ``How do you feel about our relationship? Is there anything that I do that hurts or bothers you? In what area should we be closer?''. These are hard questions if you take them seriously. But they get to the point and help you identify and resolve problems before they become too big.

Problems in setting boundaries with others

Sometimes, third parties intrude into our marriage because we have never learned to say no to other people. We don't know how to turn down our boss or our customer who always asks for extra work time. We don't want to disappoint our church by refusing to join the fifth committee. We don't want to hurt our elderly mother who feels so alone unless we spend every other evening together with her. We give everything for the people around us and people love us for this.

There is only one person who is disappointed - our own spouse. He loves our noble character, the willingness to sacrifice. But he suffers from the fact that we belong to everyone, not just to him. By not saying no to others, we say no to our spouse.

People who have difficulties in setting limits often feel torn between others and their spouse. They are *divided, unstable in all they do* and never at rest, because they always feel guilty about letting others down and they feel even more guilty about letting their spouse down.

If you find yourself in such a situation, you need to realize that your problem is not all those demanding people in your life but your *desire for approval* and possibly a great

fear of losing love - coupled with the misconception that love is tied to ``being good''. And you're probably less afraid of turning down your spouse that your boss our your pastor - as if working on our relation with these people would be more important than caring for our mate.

Although you have responsibilities to the outside world and should be faithful in your job and active in your church, your top priority should be your spouse **(Proverbs 4:23, Revelation 2:10c, Genesis 2:24)**. The love of your spouse is more important than what other people think of you. This means you have to become honest with others about your real limitations and turn down people who demand too much of you. Your marriage will certainly benefit from this.

If you're married to a person who is afraid of saying no to others and feels guilty about it, refrain from nagging because this only increases her fears. But do not ignore the problem either, as it won't go away by itself. Offer your help in a loving way and start working on the root of the problem together.

Inability to live with differences

Sometimes a couple allows the outside world to intrude into their marriage because one or both of the spouses cannot deal with the differences between them. As they realize that their views of theology, politics, career, family, finances, entertainment, and even intimacy differ - sometimes even strongly - they begin to invest more and more time and energy in separate activities and friends - until they are more invested in them than in their marriage.

While the existence of separate friends and activities is often beneficial for a relationship, the marriage should still be the home base for our feelings and souls. If you go to the outside because our spouse is so different from us, you have become the victim of a huge misconception. Being different is *not* a problem for a marriage. In fact, it should be a benefit, because the alternative viewpoint of your spouse can enlarge your horizon **(Proverbs 15:14a, 15:31-32, 16:20a, 18:2)**. Constantly interacting with the feelings and opinions of another human being will help you adjusting your thinking in matters you were so sure to have it all figured out. We need these differences.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they all were one part, where would the body be? ***(1. Corinthians 12:17-19)***.

The ability to deal with differences is a sign of our maturity. If we can't accept the differences of our spouse, we easily become the prey of intruders who agree with us. Triangulation begins at this point: we find people who will agree with our opinion, especially about the bad points of our spouse.

You don't have to give up your own reality in order to understand your spouse's different viewpoints. If you're mature, you can appreciate the sentiments of your spouse and come to a negotiated agreement, using love, values, principles, and also sacrifice. Your differences do not create a problem in your marriage. Immaturity does.

Occasionally, of course, differences can become a source of conflict in your marriage. This is quite normal, as you will encounter situations where both of you have strong, but opposing opinions. If both of you are mature, you will try to resolve even such strong differences.

However, some people fear these conflicts more than others, because they can't feel connected while disagreements and differences are present. They are afraid of losing the love of their spouse and avoid conflict at all costs. As a consequence, the distance between them and their spouse increases and the become vulnerable to intruders.

If you are afraid of conflict, be aware of the dangers of avoiding it. Conflict is an ally, not an enemy, as it can help you sharpen both your marriage and your own personality.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. ***(Proverbs 27:17)***.

Dealing with specific intruders

Intruders, as we have pointed out, are not the cause of marriage problems, but the result of the real problem. Nevertheless, they weaken our marriage bond once they have come between us and our spouse, which means that we need to find ways to deal with them. Different intruders require different ways of dealing with them, since they usually point to different kinds of problems that promoted their presence.

When dealing with intruders, we have to keep in mind, that we need to deal with the real cause. If we don't, our solution will only be a temporary one and different intruders will show up soon after we have managed to get rid of the current ones.

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says ``I will return to the house I left''. When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean an put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. ***(Luke 11:24-26)***.

In the following we will look at a few examples of intruders. Dealing with them means evaluating what these symptoms tell about our marriage, how they affect the

less-involved spouse, and how to negotiate a solution that enables both partners to grow and strengthen the love between each other.

Work

Overworking is more prevalent in the United States than in most other countries of the world. Many people define ourselves by what we do rather than by who they are in the sight of God. We all know the stereotype of a workaholic husband whose wife feels that he loves his job and his career more than her. While in some rare cases this may actually be the case, the real issues are often quite different. Here are a few examples and possible solutions.

Attachment problems:
A person's inability to relate emotionally to his spouse may cause him to flee to work, where he feels more competent.
Since he is apparently not able to deal with his attachment problems himself, his spouse may have to help him first to own his problem and then to connect on the emotional levels.
Desire for approval:
We all need the praise and approval of people from time to time. In today's society many people believe that the affirmation of work is the only one that really counts, and some may actually get addicted to that.
A person with such an attitude towards life needs to experience that love is much more worth than admiration. That will help him set his his priorities straight, give up the demand to be praised at all times, and thus return to his family.

What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? ***(Matthew 16:26a)***.

But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you ***(Matthew 6:33)***.

A sense of inferiority:
Some people feel that they are just not as good as other people and try to prove their worth by working overtime to reach better results.
Such a person needs to experience that he is accepted and loved the way he is - both by God **(Psalms 139:14)** and his spouse. Love is much more worth than accomplishment, and as soon as he realizes that he will be able to let go of trying the impossible.
Lack of safety:
Some people react to hurt in their marriage by withdrawing to work. They feel not safe enough with their partner so they look elsewhere to experience more positive relationships.
In this case the couple may need external help, so that both partners feel safe enough in their marriage to endure conflict without withdrawing. They need to know that the other spouse will always accept them, even when they disagree over some matter.
Lack of freedom:
Sometimes, a person feels controlled by his spouse and works seems to him the only way to get some freedom.

This is a serious problem, which requires both partners to work hard on themselves. He needs to work on being more direct about is needs while his spouse needs to work on respecting his boundaries.

What can we do in these scenarios? Demanding that the overworker should spend less time at work will not solve the problem but only increase his fears. We also have to keep in mind that God expects us to work sincerely and diligently.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men ***(Colossians 3:23)***.

So the answer is not to quit work, but to find the right attitude towards it, while dealing with the character and relationship problems. A spouse can do a lot to help her partner let go of excessive work and devote more time and energy to the relationship. The more she invests into helping him, the more she will receive in return.

Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured to you ***(Luke 6:38)***.

Children

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ``Honor your father and mother'' (this is the first commandment with a promise), ``that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.'' Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.
(Ephesians 6:1-4)

Children are built-in intruders on a marriage. They need so much attention, so much help and assistance, so often. Immature parents often fail to see that children, despite all their needs, also need boundaries, and end up putting parenting above their marriage. As a result, their marriage will be in deep trouble soon. Again, the real cause has little to do with the children themselves but with character issues of the spouses.

Hiding intimacy conflicts:
The couple may have problems with finding the right balance between intimacy and control, yet fails to deal with the issue. Devoting more and more time to children is one way to avoid the problem without feeling guilty. After all, you can never give enough time to kids.

Both partners must realize that they need to deal with their intimacy conflict. They need to bring out their conflicting needs, desires, and fears in a safe and loving atmosphere and then begin to work through them.

Overidentifying with children:
Some parents feel totally responsible for their children's lives and have a hard time letting go. They feel that their spouse, being an adult, can handle the neglect and that they must devote every minute to their children. If they don't, they feel guilty of being a mother who abandons her children.

Such parents have serious misconceptions about raising children (and will later find out that their children are not thankful for that at all). They need to learn to allow age-appropriate space between them and their children (see Section 6.4) and to give them the chance to become separate individuals. This will not only help the children to grow into responsible adults but also allow the couple to become closer.

Children appear easier to deal with:
Sometimes a parent has the impression that dealing with children is easier than dealing with a spouse. He feels that the kids listen to what he says while his spouse doesn't.

In such cases the couple needs to work again on respecting each other's boundaries. Each partner must know that his opinions are respected and listened to, without requiring his spouse to agree to them. Both spouses must help each other feeling both love and freedom.

Misperceptions about parenting:
Right now, we live in a ``childocentric'' culture, which gives some parents the impression that caring for their children is all that counts. Some parents rather break up with their spouses than taking time and energy away from their children for the benefit of the relationship.

These parents have never thought about the fact that parenting is intended to be temporary and marriage permanent - not the other way around. They need to realize that this is a serious misperception and adjust their values appropriately.

Family

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you ***(Exodus 20:12)***.

In-laws - their interference with a couple's marriage has been the subject of many jokes and also of many sad stories. We hear of couples who don't have enough time for each other, because one of them feel guilty if she doesn't spend at least every other evening with her lonely mother or because the family drops in at every impossible time. We hear of of husbands who still compare everything their wife's do with the way mother used to do it. Or of couples whose marriage is essentially run by one of

the spouses' parents who make all the important decisions. The stories go on and on, and many a marriage is in severe problems because in-laws intrude between the couple.

As before, the real issues are not the in-laws who don't seem to be willing to leave us alone, but character issues in one or both of the spouses.

Incomplete leaving:
Some people experience that the real allegiance of their spouse is not with them but with her parents and siblings. For her, family (of origin) comes first and he gets what is left over.

In this case, the spouse hasn't completed the leaving process that is a prerequisite for becoming one with her partner.

For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united with his wife and they will become one flesh ***(Genesis 2:24)***.

For a marriage to work, the spouse needs to loosen her ties with the family of origin and forge new ones with the new family she is creating through marriage. This doesn't mean that she can't have a close relationship with their extended families, but she needs to set proper boundaries with them to make sure that her spouse (apart from God) has topmost priority in her life.

Financial dependency:
Some couples have gotten used to receiving financial support from one of the spouse's parents. They have supported them to get started, bailed them out in a financially troublesome situation, gave them a generous gift here and there ...and after a while this became a habit. As a result, the financial decisions of the couple are essentially made by the parents.
What happens here is that one spouse or both are not adults yet as far as finances are concerned. They have not learned to say no to wishes that they cannot afford or are just plain irresponsible and thus constantly in trouble. To become mature adults, they have to learn financial responsibility, that is live within their means, being content with what they can afford, and paying for their own failures.
Codependency:
Some people are just born to take care of their parents. Early in life they felt responsible for their parents and never learned to set proper boundaries between them and their sometimes irresponsible parents. Every time they tried to have a separate life they felt selfish.

While the Bible does teach that we should take care of parents in need **(1. Timothy 5:3-4)**, this does not mean that we have the duty to be available for them all the time. Some of the parent's needs are more imagined than real, and some of their real needs simply cannot be met by us. A couple needs to decide together, how much they can and want to give, such that they can love and appreciate the parent instead of growing resentful.

After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ***(2. Corinthians 12:14b)***.

Friends

Good friends are a treasure in any marriage. They can help the couple to look beyond the horizon of the immediate relationship and may meet some needs of each individual that the spouse cannot meet. However, quite often a couple feels that friends have come between them. A husband may always find ways to spend time with his buddies and to avoid one-on-one times. A wife may come to life only when friends are around and appear bored when only her husband is present. A questionable best friend may interfere with the marriage. As before, the underlying issues have to do mostly with the couple and not with the friends themselves.

Superficiality:
One partner may be more broad than deep and be afraid of the closeness that comes with intimacy. He avoids close relations and builds many superficial friendships.

Fear of intimacy has a lot to do with fear of being hurt or abandoned if somebody else gets too close. He needs to experience that his marriage is a safe place for him to open up and also realize that superficial friendships won't help him grow.

A man of many companions may come to ruin. But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother ***(Proverbs 18:24)***.

Hurt in the marriage:
Sometimes, of course, a partner may have experienced rejection and deep hurt from his spouse, for instance by being constantly criticized for weaknesses, anger or needs. So friends become the place where he can open up.

In this case the other spouse needs to work on accepting all of her partner **(Luke 6:37)** and on developing an attitude of compassion and forgiveness when she has to rebuke him for some real sin **(Matthew 18:15, Luke 17:3)**.

Perfectionism:
Some spouses have difficulties living with the fact that their spouse is not perfect. So they give up on him and invest in others who appear closer to perfection than he.

There are two things that need to be done here. The perfectionistic spouse must learn to let go of unrealistic demands while the couple should work on making her life good enough that she can feel comfortable although life is not ideal.

Sharing secrets with friends:
Sometimes, one partner has secret conversations with friends about issues that his spouse knows nothing about. This does not only hurt his spouse but also prevents their relationship from becoming as deep as it is intended.

Sometimes this is just a bad habit that must be broken. Each partner must realize that spouses should have no serious secrets in their marriage. A close relationship is able to withstand even some of the darker realities of each partner and provides a safe place for finding a way out of them. But of course, some marriages are not stable enough for dealing with the full truth and may require a healthy setting such as pastoral counseling or therapy until they are strong enough to deal with what exists between them.

Affairs

Affairs are probably the most hurtful intruder for a marriage and have led to the death of many a struggling relationship. What should a couple do if the mutual trust has been broken by an affair. What should a husband do, when he finds out that his wife had a sexual relationship with some other man? What should a wife do, when she discovers that there is some other woman in her husband's life. Should she kick him out of the house for that? Should he divorce his sinful wife?

After all, an affair is adultery, a sin so great that the Bible condemns it over and over again. We all know that Jesus permitted divorce in this case.

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery ***(Matthew 19:9)***.

Does that mean that a good Christian should file for divorce if his spouse has become unfaithful, because the marriage has been destroyed by her sinful behavior?

I don't believe so. An affair, as painful as it is, does not necessarily have to mean the end of a marriage. Although God permits divorce in the case of marital unfaithfulness, he doesn't demand it. Neither **Mark 10:1-12** nor **Luke 16:18** mention marital unfaithfulness as reason that allows us to divorce our spouse. And **Matthew 19:8** gives us the true reason why he permits it at all.

Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning ***(Matthew 19:8)***.

Sometimes, it was better for the wife to sent away by her hard-hearted husband than to be neglected and mistreated for the rest of her life. It was for the sake of the unloved woman that God permitted her to be set free again, not for the sake of the unloving husband who wanted to get rid of her. But God never intended divorce to become a natural end to a marriage.

``I hate divorce'', says the Lord God of Israel ***(Malachi 2:16)***.
Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate ***(Matthew 19:6)***.

An affair, like any other intruder, is only a symptom of deeper, probably quite severe problems in the marriage. So if your spouse is truly repentant, willing to give up the affair, and desires to do everything to repair the broken trust, you should be compassionate and forgiving and begin to work together on the real problems that have led to this situation.

Love ... keeps no record of wrongs ***(1. Corinthians 13:5)***.

Sadly enough, some self-righteous Christians use **Matthew 5:32** as an excuse to get rid of their unfaithful spouse, even if she is repentant, instead of working on rebuilding their marriage together. This clearly indicates that they don't love their wives at all and - although superficially appearing as innocent victims - are as guilty of the death of their relationship as she is.

What then are the possible causes for affairs?

Emptiness in the marriage:
Some spouses have lost the connection to their partner, desperately seek for someone to connect to, and fall for the first person that seems to offer what they miss in their marriage.
Narcissistic tendencies:
Some people consider themselves as so perfect that they expect to be constantly admired and looked up to. They resent being reminded of their imperfection and search for somebody else to stroke their ego.
Victim-Perpetrator issues:
In some marriages one spouse takes on the role of the helpless victim and views her partner as the predatory perpetrator. The victim will then seek out a rescuer-type to protect her from her evil spouse and develop closer ties to him than to her spouse. However, when the rescuer begins to show signs of flaws she will view him as perpetrator as well and the circle continues.
The only way to say no:
Overly compliant people find themselves unable to set any limits in the marriage and feel overwhelmed by the expectations of their spouse. The affair becomes the only way to say no.

These examples indicate severe character problems or problems in the relationship that must be addressed immediately, probably with the support of joint counseling. But there is hope. In many cases, where the unfaithful spouse was truly repentant and both started working on the underlying problems, the affair actually served as a wake-

up call for maturity and led to greater intimacy and strength in the marriage than before.

The above list of intruders is by no means complete. There are others, such as church, hobbies, television, internet, sports, shopping, and other addictions. They all need to be evaluated in a similar way to find out what their effect on the marriage is and what may be the real problem behind them. This will help finding a compromise that both partners can live with and that addresses the real problem in a way that the marriage bond is strengthened again.

Internal Conflicts

In the previous chapter we have discussed conflicts that intrude into a marriage from the outside. We now want to look at conflicts that arise within the marriage. Marital conflicts are common in every marriage, because both spouses are different individuals with very different backgrounds, feelings, and expectations. They range from simple disagreements about unimportant things to serious problems that are caused by sinful behavior of one spouse. Common examples are

%3. Sin of one spouse
%3. Immaturity or brokenness of one person
%3. Hurt feelings that are no one's fault
%3. Conflicting desires
%3. Individual desires versus the needs of the relationship
%3. Hidden faults

The rules for dealing with such conflicts depend on the nature of the conflict. When you come home late without calling, for instance, you owe your spouse a sincere apology (not a lame excuse). When you can't agree on where to go to dinner, no one should behave as if the other had committed the unpardonable sin.

Yet often we see that a couple argues about minor things forever instead of resolving the conflict. They feel that every conflict has only a right and a wrong. And since each spouse doesn't want to be the one who is wrong, they try to prove to the other that he is wrong. Quite often, they dig out old incidents to prove their point and after a while both partners are very hurt and angry. And this only because one wanted to spend the evening at home and the other wanted to go out for dinner. There is no right and wrong in such a conflict.

In the following we want to look at some common forms of marital conflicts and proper ways to address them. Distinguishing what kind of conflict we are in will equip us better to find a solution that is acceptable for both partners and the relationship as well.

Sin of one spouse

The conflict scenario is relatively simple if someone has done something wrong. One spouse has sinned against the other - not in imaginary ways but in an obvious way. There is no shortage of areas in which we can sin against each other. The Bible warns us about a variety of sins that we should stay away from.

Put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since your have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator. ***(Colossians 3:5,8-9)***

The acts of the sinful nature are plain: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.
(Galatians 5:19-21)

In a marriage relationship, our sinful nature is often revealed by one the following:

> Angry outbursts, name calling, impatience, a critical attitude, judgmentalism, controlling behavior, misuse of power, belittling, other emotionally injurious behavior, pride, selfishness, jealousy, envy, conceit, lying, deception, out-of-control spending of family money (which is thievery), greed, substance abuse, and sexual sin.

What can we do when our spouse sins against us? Shall we demonstrate our love to by ignoring the sin? Isn't that what keeps a Christian marriage alive?

Not quite. Although we should definitely have a loving attitude in all that we do, the Bible is very clear about how to deal with sin.

He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue ***(Proverbs 28:23)***.

Rebuke your neighbor frankly, so you will have no share in his guilt. ***(Leviticus 19:17b)***.

If your bother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. ***(Matthew 18:15a)***.

There is no way out. Sin must be confronted to bring the sinner back on track. But when we confront sin, we have to make sure that our motives are pure and that our attitude is one of compassion. We all know, that we fall short of the glory of God. While this must not be taken as reason to remain silent about the sin, it makes clear that there should be no feeling of superiority when we point out sin to our spouse - even if the sin is as serious as an addiction. Otherwise we become guilty of judgmentalism ourselves.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ God forgave you ***(Ephesians 4:32)***.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven ***(Luke 6:37)***.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently ***(Galatians 6:1)***

When we talked about the value of love for your spouse (Section 8.3), we pointed out the importance of empathy: identifying with your spouse's feelings and wanting the best for our spouse. We do not want to lord it over our spouse and at the same time we should not minimize the sin. We should love the sinner and be tough on the sin.

Some people find this very difficult. But there is a simple guideline that we can follow when confronting sin in out spouse.

%3. *Look at your own attitude.* Make sure that you get rid of all judgmentalism, condemnation, and pride before you rebuke your spouse.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ``let me take the speck out of your eye'', when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your brother's eye ***(Matthew 7:3-5)***.

You cannot wait until you are sinless before you confront sin in your spouse. But you can rid yourself of the kind of sin that prevents you from seeing clearly enough.

%3. *Make sure that it is really sin what you want to address.* Quite often the things that bother us are different behaviors, conflicting desires, and annoying habits of our spouse. Although these things may greatly disturb us, they are not sins and should not be treated as such. It is not helpful to accuse your spouse of sinning against you, just because he does things that you don't like. These issues have to be dealt with differently.

   When in doubt, consult the scriptures. The Bible is very clear about what is sin and what is not and using scripture when talking about the issue certainly helps making your points clear to your spouse.

%3. *Speak to the issue directly.* The biggest mistake that people make when confronting a sin in their partner is to launch a global attack on all of his failings. If you want to win him over, you must talk about the specific sin, and only about that one.

   Tell him that what he is doing is not right. If the sin was not against you, this should be all. Otherwise, you should also let him know how you feel, how his sin affects you and the kind of hurt it creates. Use ``I''-statements. There is no point in telling him that he is the most insensitive person on this planet or that he hurts you on purpose. Character assaults lead nowhere and will only make him defensive. What is really important here is that he understands the pain you feel because of what he did.

%3. *Offer forgiveness.* If you followed the above advice, there is a good chance that your spouse will acknowledge his sin and apologize. Accept the apology, forgive him, and reaffirm your love and acceptance.
%3. *Offer support to solve underlying issues.* Often, there is a deeper problem that led to the sin you confronted. When the emotions are not strong, talk about what happened so see if further help is needed, even though he repented. Offer you support and help to solve the problem. If necessary, seek outside help together.
%3. *Agree on a follow-up plan.* What shall be done if the sin re-occurs? How can you help your spouse in this case? You should work together to deal with the problem. Again, in some cases it may be better to bring additional resources to the problem, such as friends who hold him accountable as well. The issue is not to police him, but to become a team that fights the re-occurrence together.

Immaturity or brokenness of one spouse

All of us fall short of the demands of life in some or the other way. This is quite normal and in most marriages both spouses have found ways for dealing with the shortcomings of their partners. The situation is more difficult, however, if one spouse seems to be unable to deal with a normal daily load and the other has a hard time accepting her weakness.

For instance, a housewife may not be able to complete the normal chores of housework during the daytime and her husband has to do these things after he comes home from work if he wants some form of order in the house. Or a husband may have trouble controlling his spending habits and thus ruins his wife's attempts to manage the tight family budget.

These are difficult situations and the ``victim'' might easily get upset about his spouse's apparent lack of responsibility. After all, he is the one who has to suffer the consequences. However, nagging only makes the problem worse, since the real issue is not an unwillingness of his spouse but an inability to do certain things right.

Most people are totally unaware of these shortcomings of their spouse when they marry. In fact, this is what ``being in love'' is about: you idealize the other person and realize where he or she falls short of that ideal - even if the shortcomings are very obvious to others. Being in love makes you blind for such things.

But eventually, reality will surface, and both of you need to face the conflict that arises from it. Here are a few helpful ways to do so.

%3. *Accept reality.* Both of you have promised to unconditionally accept your spouse - no matter what life will bring. And over the years you will discover, that both you and your mate have certain weaknesses. Your spouse may have
    - a lack of structure and self-discipline
    - inabilities to manage finances or to make money in the first place.
    - not yet grown into a mature adult (see Section 7)
    - not completely left home, still clinging too strongly to his family of origin
    - difficulties to get close, sustain intimacy, or communicate emotions
    - emotional problems due to past experiences, particularly in the family of origin
    - sexual difficulties resulting from fear, traumatic events, shame, or other emotional factors
    - depressions resulting from various health issues, such as thyroid or hormone problems

    None of these weaknesses are ``sins'', even if their effects may really bother you. Your spouse is immature in some areas and needs to grow. But that is how she is right now. Even if ``every normal person on the face of the earth'' can do what your spouse cannot do, you have to accept the current reality without condemning her for what she is right now.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven ***(Luke 6:37)***.

Love is patient and kind; ...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ***(1. Corinthians 13:4,7)***

Expecting your spouse to be the ideal partner is unrealistic and only prolongs the problem. Accepting reality helps focusing on a solution instead of the problem.

%3. *Communicate your support to your spouse.* Growing out of immaturities is difficult if we have to do this in an environment where we are judged, nagged, condemned, or resented. We need to feel that our spouse is on our side and supports us.

Your spouse feels the same way, so if you want her to grow, you need to let her know that you are her biggest supporter. Make sure that she understands that you love and accept her just the way she is, and that you will be patient with her as she tries to address her weakness or inability and support her in every way you can.

And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all ***(1. Thessalonians 5:14)***.

%3. *Face issues as real problems.* Unconditional acceptance does not mean that you should ignore the problem. Part of love, as discussed in Section 8, is honesty and requiring your spouse to strive for growth and a holy life. You can't let her remain ignorant of her immaturities.

Love does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.
(1. Corinthians 13:6)

Honesty is not easy, but the most successful approach is being direct but free of shame and condemnation. Assure her of your love, tell her that you understand her difficulties, but let you know how *you* are affected by her immaturities and that you wish things differently. If she understands that you suffer the effects of her inabilities but do not blame her for that, she will feel motivated to address the problem.

%3. *Own your problems.* Some people have difficulties accepting that they are doing things that cause pain to their spouse. They react defensively when being confronted with their own weaknesses, blame their spouse for their problem, or claim that their behavior is perfectly normal and that their spouse is totally unrealistic. While some of that may even be true to some degree, a defensive reaction does not help at all.

Be wise, listen to feedback, and try to understand what the person who sees you every day has been learning about you. You may not be aware of the things that are obvious to the outside. Don't fight the truth but welcome correction, even if it is uncomfortable. And once you understand the problem,

own it. It is your weakness, and only you can overcome it. Your spouse cannot do that for you - all he can do is help you.

He who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray. ***(Proverbs 10:17)***.
Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid. ***(Proverbs 12:1)***.
There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way; he who hates reproof will die. ***(Proverbs 15:10)***.
He who ignores instruction despises himself, but he who heeds admonition gains understanding. ***(Proverbs 15:32)***.
A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool ***(Proverbs 17:10)***.

%3. *Get a plan.* Once the problem has become clear to both partners, it is time to find ways to address it. Make a plan. Decide what is needed to solve the problem and what can be done to follow through with the solution. You may need help from others, maybe therapy, or counseling. You may need to see a doctor. You may have to develop an accountability system. Make sure that the problem does not rule your family but that that you *overcome* it by being serious about dealing with it. Devote time, resources, and energy to solving the problem. You may have to reorganize a part of your life to do so, but it is certainly worth it.
%3. *Make it mutual.* One of the greatest dangers of dealing with immaturity and brokenness of one spouse is labeling one person as ``the problem'' and the other as the one who is o.k. Just because one person's immaturity is more obvious, this does not mean that she is the only one who needs to grow in the relationship. Neither of you is perfect yet, no one is superior or inferior - in God's eyes you are both equal, and you should view each other the same way.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made ***(Psalm 139:14)***.

Usually, both spouses complement each other better than they might realize. Where one is weak, the other one is strong. This may not be so easy to realize if one spouse's weaknesses are more obvious or if taking care of her weaknesses absorbs all the energy that both of you have. Often, one partner has to grow more in the *relational* area, such as expressing feelings and confronting problems, and the other in the *functional* area of life, such as getting things done or managing time, finances, and other resources.

You need to help *each other* in these areas of weakness. Remember, the two of you have become one, so if one part suffers, so does the other - just in a different way.

So ought men also to love their own wives as their own bodies: he that loves his own wife loves himself. For no one has ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, even as also the Christ the assembly: for we are members of his body; we are of his flesh, and of his bones. Because of this a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be united to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh. This mystery is great, but I speak as to Christ, and as to the assembly. But ye also, every one of you, let each so love his own wife as himself; but as to the wife I speak that she may fear the husband. ***(Ephesians 5:28-33)***.

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together ***(1. Corinthians 12:26)***.

> You are no longer individuals in the way singles are. Both of you are in need of growth but you can join forces to address the problems that are in your way. As a team you will do much better than if you try alone.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. ***(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)***

> Don't just focus on the problems of one spouse and neglect the other's need to grow, just because his problems are not as apparent. Make helping the other mutual: confront each other in an honest and loving way, support each other, and grow together.

Hurt feelings that are no one's fault

Occasionally, a couple runs into the situation that one spouse feels hurt because she is disappointed about something that just happened. She hoped for a romantic evening, but her husband gets called away for an emergency. She wanted to buy these long overdue decorations for the house but all the money they saved has to be used to pay for a medical bill. The long-planned vacations have to be canceled because he got sick. She desires to live in a nicer and not so tiny house but the family simply cannot afford to buy a new one. She may be plagued by a disease and there is little her husband can do about it.

There are plenty of situations that may create disappointments. But these situations are nobody's fault. They just happen. Things just don't work out the way we want them to. Sometimes our dreams just fall apart and we feel disappointed and hurt. It is not easy to shrug off these feelings. So what can we do?

Many spouses handle such a situation gracefully. Despite their hurt feelings they realize that no one could have done anything about it. But others have a hard time dealing with the disappointment and believe that their partner has failed them. After all, isn't he responsible to keep all hurt, disappointment, and unhappiness from her?

People who think so often blame their spouse for what happened and treat him as if he had sinned against her. And then the sad game begins. The accused partner tries to defend himself against these unfair accusations and suddenly both partners go to court against each other, each of them blaming the other in order to defend his or her own innocence - as if one's own innocence could only be proven by making the other one guilty. Neither of them sees that there is no guilt in the first place. And so they miss the great opportunity of working through the disappointment together. Instead of giving each other encouragement and growing together even stronger they turn against each other and end up alienated. The problem that originally led to the situation remains unsolved, because it is not talked through anymore after the feelings have calmed down. What went wrong here?

Sadly enough, this pattern happens in many relationships. Initially, neither of the two has committed a transgression. No one was guilty for the situation in the first place. But one of the spouses is just too sensitive and has never learned to deal with hurt properly. By putting the blame on her husband she triggers a chain reaction that leads the relationship to a steep decline. In the end, both partners have become guilty. They become angry - first at the situation, then at each other. And they neglect dealing with that in a godly way.

We can't do much against hurt feelings. But we can prevent them from dominating us. Rage, angry outbursts, unwarranted accusations are sinful reactions to the anger we feel **(Colossians 3:8)**. And failing to resolve our anger before the day is over only opens a wide door for Satan to step in and mess with our feelings even more.

*In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold **(Ephesians 4:26-27)**.*

*A quick-tempered man does foolish things **(Proverbs 14:17a)**.*

For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell.
(James 3:2-6)

The Bible clearly tells us that we need to learn to control our tongue. No matter how bad we feel, angry words and accusations don't help.

Now it is easy to say that the hurt spouse should just stop putting the blame on her husband and the problem would be solved. If it were that easy, she wouldn't do it in the first place. But there are a few helpful ideas that help a couple deal with these situations properly and to avoid the traps Satan is laying out for them. If both partners commit to following certain guidelines it will become easier to go through these situations victoriously.

%3. *When you are hurt, acknowledge it to yourself.* Know yourself well enough to realize what is going on inside you. Don't ignore how you feel, since your feelings will affect your behavior unless you take control of them. Find out what it really is that is bothering you. If your feelings have to do with something he did, don't rush to the conclusion that he is responsible for your feelings or even that he has sinned against you.

   The Bible tells us not to pass judgment on others or condemn them **(Luke 6:37)**. Your feelings are real, but they are your responsibility, not your spouse's.

   Children sometimes grow up feeling that their parents are omnipotent. They can give them everything they want and can keep all hurt away from them. Over the time this becomes their definition of love. If they experience disappointment or pain, they rather believe that their parents don't love them than accepting that something is beyond their parents' powers. Mature adults should have outgrown this kind of thinking. Your spouse cannot keep all hurt and disappointment away from you. This is not a lack of love but just a sign that he is not all-powerful. It doesn't help being angry at him just because *you* feel hurt.

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage or anger **(Ephesians 4:31a)**.*

%3. *Communicate your feelings.* Don't pretend that everything is o.k. when you actually feel hurt. It doesn't help sweeping problems under the rug, because that prevents them from being solved. Your spouse is going to sense anyway, that something is wrong, and lying about it only makes things worse.

*Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another **(Ephesians 4:25)**.*

Let your spouse know how you are feeling. If you are feeling hurt by something that he did or did not do, let him know that as well - but do not blame him for that. The point is that he needs to understand what is going on inside you and what has led to these feelings. Communicate to him that you know that the problem is yours and that you only want him to understand and help you.

As before, it helps to *use ``I'' statements* - talking about what is going on inside you and the situation that led to these feeling, not about the fact that *he* did something that hurt you. This may be difficult, if you are used to holding others responsible for negative things in your life and have never learned to communicate in this way. But you can train this form of communication. If you want your message to come across, you have to make sure that don't sound as if you were blaming your spouse.

But what do you do if he does not understand what you? Then the best thing you can do is let it be.

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent ***(Proverbs 10:19)***.
He who guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin ***(Proverbs 13:3)***.

You have made your point and you can't knock things over his head just because he doesn't understand what is so obvious to you. Adding more and more words to the subject doesn't help but increases the risk that you sound like blaming him after all.

%3. *Empathize.* If you are on the other side of the hurt, try to show empathy for your spouse's feelings instead of devaluing them - even if you can't identify with these feelings. Showing empathy doesn't mean that you have to feel the same way or that you accept that everything was your fault. But it does express that you care. Take time to listen instead of trying to give advice right away.

Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, ***(James 1:19)***
Love is patient and kind; ... Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. ***(1. Corinthians 13:4a,5b, RSV)***

When you communicate that you understand how she feels, you are becoming part of the healing process ... instead of part of the problem.

%3. *Identify patterns and plan.* Quite often, hurt feelings reoccur in similar situations. If this is the case, it helps to find out what situations are causing the

hurt, so that you may better anticipate things and take precautions to avoid them - or at least to react to them in a helpful manner.

For instance, you may realize that one partner feels neglected when the other one is under stress, so you both have to think about ways to reduce this stress or, if this is not always possible, to give early warning signals and then try to find tiny little time slots just for the two of you.

Or, you may realize that certain situations trigger an old hurt or fear from past events that you have not really overcome yet. In this case you may need to pursue healing in that area through counseling or therapy to stop it from interfering with your life.

%3. *Guard against ``going to court''.* When one of you feels hurt, don't try to find out who is right and who is wrong. There is little to be gained by that. The feelings are real and both of you should accept that. But unless there is an obvious sin involved, these feelings have little to do with wrongdoings. They need to be addressed with understanding and empathy, not by going to court and condemning each other.

   When you try to convince your spouse that he has done something wrong to cause these feelings, your hearts will become disconnected. Instead of getting the understanding and empathy you desire, he will only distance himself from you and your hurt will increase. If you avoid going to court you can work on the problem together.

   Marriage is a place where feelings get stepped on. We can't avoid this. But we can avoid that hurt feelings separate us, if we commit ourselves to being a healing agent for our spouse, with empathy, understanding, nondefensiveness, and care.

Conflicting desires

One of the most common conflicts in a relationship arises from the fact that we have different desires that cannot be met at the same time. We all have experienced situations like the following

%3. One person wants to go out while the other likes to spend the evening at home.
%3. One person likes to watch adventure movies, the other prefers comedies.
%3. One likes to spend money on improving the house, the other wants to save the money for larger investments in the future.
%3. One wants to spend the vacations on the beach, the other in the mountains.
%3. One prefers a traditional worship service, the other one finds this boring and prefers a more contemporary style.

There are plenty of areas, where we may experience conflicting desires, because two people bring different preferences into the relationship. In fact, the differences between us were exactly what attracted us to each other in the first place. We

complement each other - each seeing a strength or fascinating aspect in the other, which is so beautifully different from what we are used to. That is the way we look at these differences during courtship. But after a while, these differences also create conflicts, because sometimes our desires cannot be satisfied ... because our spouse wants to see her desires met as well.

Ideally, conflicting desires can be negotiated easily if both partners develop a pattern of give and take. In a relationship where both partners really care for each other, each will happily see to it that his spouse's needs are filled, without fearing that his own desires will be permanently neglected.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. ***(Ephesians 5:21-22, 25)***

Give, and it will be given to you ***(Luke 6:38)***

But sometimes even the most caring couple hits a stalemate, where each finds it difficult to give into the desires of the other. What should we do in these situations? Determine that, after all, the husband is the boss and should have the right to decide? Or use the old ``*if you really love me, then you* ..." argument?

Here are a few principles that can help making sure that conflicting desires do not lead to conflicts in the relationship.

%3. *Question your own preferences.* Some of the things that seem to be extremely important to you may not be your true desires: seeing them met will not give you real fulfillment, but only some temporary satisfaction, which soon will give room to new things that you ``must" have or do.

A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions ***(Luke 12:15b)****. How hard is it for the rich to enter the kingdom of God* ***(Luke 18:24)****.*

This is easy to see when it comes to material possessions. Often we believe that we ``must" have certain things that in some way or the other are very appealing to us. We fall trap to commercials, which tell us that we deserve the best, we see that others have it, or we are just attracted by things that we see or read about. But when we really think about it, we realize that we don't really need these things to feel happy, but that our true motives for wanting them are something else. We want to keep up with our neighbors and friends, we want to impress someone, we want others to think highly of us, we want to feel

good about our ability to buy expensive things, etc. And so we go and buy many things that don't give us the fulfillment that we desire.

But there are other preferences that we may have to question as well, because they do not express our true desires. Some people are driven to compete in sports, for instance, to cover feelings of insecurity. For the same reasons, others work overtime to make more money. Still others have to be busy all the time, because they feel guilty when they relax although there are still things that could or ``need to'' be done. Guilty feelings are also the reason why people do service projects in church without having a heart for this service. There are people who always have to work on improving things around the house or on keeping it neat and perfect, because they are ashamed of what people might think about them.

Many of these activities take time away from the family, but are done out of impure motives. They are not really what we desire, and consequently, we will not find fulfillment in them.

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures ***(James 4:3)***.

When you get to do what you prefer - can you really enjoy it? If the joy is shallow or if guilty feelings are creeping up after a while, chances are that your true desires are something else. Check the motives for your preferences. You may find more fulfillment giving into the relationship than investing into ``pleasures''.

%3. *Avoid moralizing your (legitimate) preferences.* In most relationships one partner is more active than the other and prefers to do ``projects'' while the other occasionally just wants to relax. For instance, a wife may prefer to use the weekends for rearranging things in the house, adding decoration, etc., while he just wants to play games with the kids or watch TV.

In these situations the active spouse may be tempted to believe that her priorities are superior to his - after all doing something has a higher moral value than just hanging around, doesn't it? So she may feel that he should help her doing her important tasks instead of being so lazy. On the other hand he may feel that after a week of hard work he deserves a rest and that she shouldn't disturb his peace by being so compulsive.

Neither of the two is right in how they feel about the other. When it comes to conflicting desires, there is no right or wrong, no morally higher ground. It is just a matter of preferences and you can't claim your spouse's preferences to be inferior to yours just because your preferences have a moral-sounding quality to it, such as working and accomplishing something, being intellectually stimulating or edifying, being more tasteful, aiming at togetherness, etc.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven ***(Ecclesiastes 3:1)****.*

Make sure you realize that your desire is not a higher one than your spouse's. His desires have the same right to be met as yours. Don't try to ``win'' by making yours right and your spouse's ``wrong''. Each of your true desires need to be met in due time.

%3. *Empathize with your spouse's desires and understand their importance.* Your spouse's desires, as strange as they may appear to you at times, are just as real to him or her as your desires are to you. Accept them as real and good - never devalue what your spouse wants.

   Of course, if some of your spouse's desires seem unrealistic or even questionable to you, you may have to point that out in a loving way. But make sure that your own preferences don't cloud your judgment (recall **Matthew 7:3-5**) and stay away from statements that make it sound as if her desires are less important than yours. Giving up a preference should always be a deliberate choice - not a forced decision.

%3. *Meet your spouse's desires before you meet your own.* This is the best advice for dealing with conflicting desires.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.. Each of you should look not only into your own interests but also the interests of others ***(Philippians 2:3-4)***

If we are trying to make sure that our mate gets what she desires first, arguments over who gets his own way will soon cease to exist. By doing so we express how much we love and value her and what we will receive in return is far more worth than seeing our preferences met.

Sometimes, of course, this can result in the funny situation that both want to give and refuse to accept. But these arguments are of a different nature (unless you want to force your will on your spouse to quench guilty feelings) and will soon create an atmosphere of mutual giving and taking. You may gladly accept the gift of love this time, knowing that next time you are permitted to give.

%3. *If there is no other way, keep and account of yours, mine, and ours.*

   Ideally, the above four steps help settling arguments about conflicting desires, since they are based on love and understanding. Unfortunately, not all

relationships are mature enough to actually proceed in this way and arguments about who gets his way go on and on.

In this case it may help to establish rules that both agree to follow when dealing with conflicting desires. Keeping an account of ``yours", ``mine", and ``ours" makes sure that conflicting desires are treated fairly and puts an end to meaningless arguments. Today one partner decides how to evening will be spent and tomorrow the other. Each partner has the right to decide how a certain part of the family budget will be spent.

Setting up an accounting system like this may seem embarrassing in the beginning but it reminds both partners that they have to share finite resources such as time and money and that they need to spend them wisely. It prevents one spouse from always ``overdrawing" the account at the expense of the other, turning him or her into the perpetual loser of the relationship. It is no substitute for a loving relationship, but helps bridging the period until the partners have learned to connect to each other and rebuilt their love. There are, however, a few caveats that need to be considered when you keep score like that.

Don't redefine an ``I'' choice as a ``we'' choice. If you enjoy togetherness, you may be tempted counting everything you two do together as ``we" choice, although most of it is actually for yourself. You are not ``giving" into the relationship, but fulfill your own desires by doing things that include your partner, who may prefer to spend certain amounts of time just by himself.

When you want your spouse to do something together with you, make sure that he really wants to do that as well before you book it onto the ``we" account. Otherwise remember that he goes along for *you* and not for the both of you and count it in the ``mine" column.

Make sure ``we's'' are agreed upon. Activities that affect both of you should be talked through together before a decision is made. If you object but never speak up, you may feel resentment about that choice later while your spouse is totally unaware of the fact that you did not really agree. When you give into the relationship, we should do so freely and not carry a grudge or emotional debt.

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly of under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver ***(2. Corinthians 9:7)***

Keep in mind that keeping score is only a step towards overcoming a lack of maturity and trust in your relationship. Eventually you have to transform scores into a relationship that is dominated by the desire to give to your spouse rather than to receive from her **(Acts 20:35)**.

%3. *Expand your horizon and grow.* When you give in to the desires of your spouse, you may find out that you actually like some of the things she likes. You just didn't like them before because you never tried. Instead of fighting your spouse, consider giving to her preferences in as a learning and stretching experience. She may know something that you don't.

   For instance, if you don't care much about decoration and arts, you may learn from allowing your spouse to make the house more beautiful according to her taste. If you can't imagine that camping in a tent rather than staying at hotels and hiking through the back country instead of just driving through can be a rewarding experience, you may see the world quite differently after the two of you have done this together a few times.

   If you try to see things through your partner's eyes, you may learn to enjoy things that you have never thought possible. After all, she likes it for a reason. Try find out what it is - and make sure you try it more than once. Even if you will not grow to like it, you will understand your spouse better and your relationship grows.

Individual desires versus the needs of the relationship

Sometimes in a relationship one partner has desires that conflict with the needs of the relationship itself. You may want to go back to school to get a higher degree and improve your career chances, but the family may need the time and money. A new job opportunity may open up but accepting it would require your family to relocate and create a lot of disruption. Your spouse may desire to spend some time for himself after having worked hard for a season. You may want to look for a less strenuous job but that would reduce the family income. After 25 years in the Northeast your spouse may want to move back to a warmer location but that that would require both of you to give up you current jobs, friends, and church family. You may desire to go on a short term missionary trip to a foreign country but your spouse is bound by his job. You may feel called to the mission field in some foreign country, but know that living circumstances will be more than difficult for your wife and children.

In each case, meeting the desire of one individual would come at the expense of the family. Does that mean the desire is selfish and should be ignored?

Not necessarily. The situation is different from the one where the desires of both partners are in conflict. In fact, it may even be the case that both partners realize that it would be good to meet that particular desire. However, they also realize that meeting this desire would come at a cost and put some strain at the relationship or the family. So what should we do?

The rule her is that there should be no fixed rule for dealing with this situation. No relationship is going to survive unless both partners will get their desires met.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it ***(1. Corinthians 12:26)****.*

But the relationship will not grow, if both aim at meeting the individual needs at the expense of the relationship. We need to find the right balance between meeting individual desires and investing into the relationship over the long term. There are times where we have to focus on the growth of the relationship and other times, where we need to take care of each partner's needs.

For instance, if a mother has sacrificed her personal desires for the family for years, it may be the right thing for the family to accept sacrificing for her, so that she can go back to school and pursue a particular talent into a career. A family may decide to relocate, so that the father can accept a new position, if no equivalent opportunities are available nearby. A couple may realize that allowing one partner to go alone on a two-month missionary trip is worth enduring the temporary separation. Or they may decide that this is more than both of them can endure. You may decide that it is wiser to postpone becoming a missionary until your children are out of school and agree to prepare for an early retirement that allows both of you to go into the mission field then.

The important aspect here is finding a proper long-term balance, but allowing temporary imbalances, even situations where the relationship only serves one member for a certain amount of time - for instance during the time when one partner finishes a new degree. However, if the relationship always serves only one member and never the others, or if all members only take from the relationship but never sacrifice for it, then the proper balance is lost.

Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ``For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ***(Ephesians 5:28-31)***

Marriage means giving up some of your individual rights for the sake of the relationship. Sometimes, the marriage returns the favor and sacrifices for the individual. In the end, the relationship grows as each member grows.

Here are some practical hints for dealing with desires that conflict with the needs of the relationship.

%3. *Remember that marriage comes first.* Giving into the relationship is more important than your individual desires. We have gotten used to instant gratification and paying for it afterwards. But marriage is not like a credit card: you cannot draw energy from it unless you have previously invested into it. Learn to postpone gratification and to wait for the right time when the relationship can afford to meet your needs.
%3. *Be clear about what you want.* Don't just passively hope that your specific desires will be met someday. Your spouse cannot read your mind, no matter how hard he tries, so he cannot work on getting this desire met. Be explicit and tell your spouse clearly what you desire. But accept that your desire may not be met right away. Both of you have to decide together when and how that shall happen.
%3. *Be excited about what your spouse wants* for him- or herself. Even if initially you cannot understand at all why he wants this, make sure that you listen carefully with an open heart, instead of becoming angry about it **(James 1:19-20)**. Because the two of you are ``one", giving in to the needs of the other will create growth from which you will benefit as well **Luke 6:38)**.
%3. *Pray for guidance* In areas where it is difficult to make a decision, remember that God gives wisdom generously to those who ask Him **(James 1:5-7)**. Ask for wisdom and spiritual strength, so that you will be ready to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit who lives in you **(Ephesians 3:16)**.
%3. *Make sure that your individual desires are balanced.* If on the long run you take much more from the relationship than your spouse, the relationship between the two of you will suffer, since the mutual giving and taking has gone lost.
%3. *Make long-term plans* for individual things that go at the expense of the relationship. This way you can plan together how to sacrifice for meeting the individual need instead of having to make hurried, unreflected decisions. Immediate requests that have to be dealt with now or never feel more like demands and should be avoided as much as possible. In most cases, opportunities that force us to make immediate decisions with major consequences appear much better than they really are and often have a hidden catch that we don't see right now.

Altogether, aim at a balance between relationship needs and individual needs. Avoid stiff rules, but let the Holy Spirit guide you so that both you and your relationship can grow.

Hidden Faults

Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression. ***(Psalm 19:12-13)***

We all have aspects to our personalities and character that we are not really aware of. It is part of being human to have a blind spot for certain of our faults. This doesn't

mean that we deny their existence, but that we simply don't see them and therefore cannot deal with them.

One of a great advantages of a marriage relationship is that we can become partners in dealing with hidden faults. Our spouses may see and know things about us that we don't know and can help us to become aware of them. The responsibility to deal with the problem is still ours, but we can work on this together **(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)**.

There are two types of hidden faults: patterns that have already been talked about and thus are known in principle, and problems that are not yet known to either of you. It is obvious that these need to be handled in different ways

Conflict in Known Problems.

If you have talked about a problem before, the problem is not really hidden anymore. You know at least about its existence even if you may not know why and when it happens. It is also clear who has the problem and that it needs to be worked on. Here are a few hints for handling such problems.

%3. *If the problem is yours, fixing it is your responsibility.* Only you are in charge of your personality and character. Don't blame your spouse for faults that lie in you, if you already know that you have that problem. Your spouse can help, but you are responsible for resolving the problem. You have to take initiative and you are the one who has to make sure the problem is actually being worked on.
%3. *Agree about what to do when the problem re-occurs.* each party should know what to expect in this case. Make sure that the one responsible for dealing with the problem cannot get away with it easily. If there are no consequences for ``misbehavior'' then there is no incentive for change. For instance, you may agree that if your partner is tardy again, she will get left behind. Or if he spends too much again, he will have to pay it back or work it off.

    But make sure that consequences are agreed upon ahead of time so that they don't appear as unfair punishment when you have to follow through with them.

%3. *If the problem is your spouse's, support but don't enable.* We talked about this over and over again. If you make it easy for your spouse to get away with his faults, you become a part of the problem. How should he fully grasp that his behavior needs to change if he doesn't see the negative effects of it.
%3. *Confront, but do not police your spouse.* The whole issue of confronting your spouse and having him experience the consequences of his actions is to help him outgrow the pattern and to win him back **(Matthew 18:15)**. You want to heal the problem by making him aware of it, but not control his behavior by watching over him like a police officer over a suspect.

Conflict in Unknown Problems.

If neither of you is aware of a certain problem, there is little you can do to prevent it. But you can agree how to deal with such problems in a loving way when they occur.

%3. First of all, *agree that you have permission to tell each other what you observe.* Both of you want to grow and get rid of hidden faults. If you allow your spouse to make you aware of issues you don't see, and if you commit yourself to tell your spouse what you notice, then you become partners in discovery and experience dealing with it as a team.

   However, when you communicate your observations to your spouse, be careful to stick to the facts and avoid interpretations (which may be clouded by your personal preferences - recall **Matthew 7:3-5**). Otherwise, what was supposed to be a helpful remark may come across as insult or character attack.

%3. *When confronted, be open and not defensive.* Accept feedback as something positive even if you don't like what you hear about yourself. Even if you don't agree with him, at least agree to look at yourself again and check if it is true.

   Ask your spouse to show you each time when this fault occurs, not just the first time. Humans tend to see problems and mistakes as one-time events and do not see if a pattern develops. Catching yourself over and over again will slowly convince you and prevent the problem from becoming a permanent habit.

%3. *Seek feedback from others, too.* Good friends will be honest about your mistakes as well **(Proverbs 27:6, 17:17, 17:10)**. If you hear the same thing from several people, you will believe it more, even if it does not fit into what you believe yourself to be.
%3. Finally, make sure to *give grace to each other.* Hearing from you about his mistakes will not be easy for your spouse, particularly in areas that are new discoveries for him. Change will not always happen immediately. Give him time, but be firm.

Resolving conflicts with your spouse

So far our discussion of conflicts has focused on dealing with particular situations: how shall a couple deal with conflicts that intrude into their relationship from the outside or arise from the inside? We have looked at steps for resolving conflicts that were tailored to the specific situation. These steps were based on the assumption that both partners are interested in addressing the conflict. In this case the *process* for dealing with the issues is easy, even if the issues themselves are quite difficult, because both partners are allies and work on solving the underlying problems together

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. ***(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)***

However, we don't always have such an ideal situation. One of us may not really be interested in working on a particular problem. He may not believe that the problem concerns him at all. He may refuse to help where his participation is needed. She may become angry when he suggests a solution that requires self-discipline and restraint. Sometimes the resistance is only imagined: we fear that our spouse doesn't care, is unwilling to change, or may react defensively when we confront him. As a consequence, we don't even try to address the problem. Either way, we become adversaries rather than allies, the necessary steps will not be initiated, and the conflict remains unresolved.

In this chapter we will look at ways for resolving conflicts with your spouse that depend on your own and your spouse's willingness to participate in a solution. We will first look at character traits that make it easy or difficult to resolve conflicts in a godly way. These will help you to find out whether you are a person who makes the solving problems more difficult than it should be and what changes you need to make to have a positive influence on your relationship. It will also help you to identify prejudices that you may have about your spouse and to interpret his reactions correctly instead of assuming that he doesn't care.

We will then look at strategies for resolving conflicts with your spouse. One is for the easy case where both of you are willing to establish and accept limitations so that you can work together on improving your relationship. The other is for the more difficult situation where you find out that your spouse actually refuses to become a responsible and active part in the solution of the problem. The latter will probably be the most difficult issue of this class, so we have to make sure that we understand it correctly and are willing to do the right thing - even if we find it strenuous.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few will find it. ***(Matthew 7:13-14)***

God never promised us that marriage is always easy. Growth doesn't always come without pain, since it requires us to leave our comfort zone and to explore the path that God wants us to go. If we trust him, we will accept the difficulties he sets before us and the changes that he wants us to make. If we try to avoid these difficulties and only do what we feel comfortable with, then we have chosen the broad path, which may seem easier at first, but actually leads nowhere.

Boundary Lovers and Boundary Busters

Conflicts point at situations that require change. The way we deal with the situation right now apparently is not the one that helps us progress, since otherwise we wouldn't experience the conflict. In any such situation we have to face two aspects

%3. the issue to be dealt with, and
%3. the ability of the involved persons to deal with the issue

Most people make the mistake of focusing only on the first aspect while neglecting the second. However, it is the second aspect that decides how difficult the process of resolving a conflict will be. Even if you have to undergo some very tough changes, the process of detecting the real problems and facing them can be easy, if both of you are open to feedback, willing to look at yourself, able to see when you are wrong, and willing to accept limits. Since you don't fight against each other, you can focus all your energy on the issue to be dealt with.

With some couples, however, the second aspect is actually the bigger problem. They are not open to feedback, cannot see when they are wrong or admit it when they see it, do not like limits of any kind, and tend to blame everyone else for their problems. Instead of dealing with the issue itself, they try to make someone else responsible for dealing with it. In this case every trivial issue can lead to a major fight, since a *boundary buster* rather turns against her spouse than accepting that she is responsible for her own problems. Modern psychiatry calls such people ``character disorders'' and seldomly expects a lot of change from them. Boundary busters often have severe difficulties with building close relationships and often will rather leave the relationship than accepting the fact that *they* - not the circumstances and people around them - are the ones who need to change. However, there is hope. Even people who strongly resist boundaries can eventually realize that establishing and accepting limits is good for them and change their attitude and behavior.

As discussed before, boundaries are designed by God for a lot of good reasons. The protect love. They enhance freedom. They allow a couple to be separate individuals that are strongly connected. They help people see what their responsibilities are and what they are not. They enable both partners to restrict their own freedom without fear and to make the love between the two grow. When two people embrace the pain of receiving and respecting their mate's boundaries, love can only flourish and deepen, since many good things result when you preserve each others boundaries.

%3. You develop self-control and patience as described in **Galatians 5:22**.
%3. You become humble and open to correction - and even self-correcting **(Proverbs 13:18, 15:5, 29:15)**.
%3. You appreciate your spouse for who he is - not for his usefulness for you **(1. Samuel 16:7b)**.

%3. Your ability to empathize with your spouse's needs, desires, and hurts increases.
%3. You depend more on your own values to make you happy instead of depending on your spouse's reaction **(Psalm 37:3-4)**.

All these contribute to your own personal growth and improve the relationship to your spouse. However, they do not come by themselves. They are consequences of your willingness to accept boundaries, which in turn is a result of your attitude towards them. *Boundary lovers* usually have most of the following character traits.

%3. They are willing to submit to God and their spouse **(Ephesians 5:21)**.
%3. They are open to feedback from others and desire to gain understanding as a result of correction or confrontation **(Proverbs 15:32b)**.
%3. They do not become defensive when they hear negative things about themselves.
%3. They accept responsibility for their own problems, feelings, attitudes, choices **(Deuteronomy 30:19b)**, and behaviors **(Galatians 6:7b)**.
%3. They have a biblical view of themselves, that is they are able to see themselves objectively and observe their behavior.
%3. They are quick to forgive and slow to anger **(1. Corinthians 13:5, James 1:19)**.
%3. They trust in their spouse.
%3. They value the treasures of their spouse.
%3. They value their spouse as a separate individual, with different experiences **(Proverbs 27:17)** .
%3. They allow their spouse the freedom to be different from them.
%3. They respect the freedom of their spouse and his need for space.
%3. They realize their own constant need for growth and change.

All these traits show that you are open to the *truth*, the *freedom of others*, to your own *responsibility*, and to *love*. Obviously, nobody is perfect in all of these traits, so there is always a possibility for further improvement. Before you try to address and resolve conflicts with your spouse, it might be good to take a close look at these traits and see where you are and where you still need to improve. Ask God to show you what you don't see and to help you make the necessary adjustments in your character.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me ***(Psalm 51:10)***.

Then you can go and confront the issues that you and your spouse need to address.

First take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your brother's eye ***(Matthew 7:5)***.

Unfortunately, not all of us are close to the above description of boundary lovers. In fact, some are pretty far away from that description. They do not want to accept that they still need to grow and change and that correction and limits from others are necessary for that **(Proverbs 12:1,15:12)**. In fact, they hate correction and limits, and often this hate turns against the one who rebukes them **(Proverbs 9:8a)**. This is *the position of one who attempts to take on the role of God*, who alone in the universe does not need to be corrected.

Of course, nobody likes to be described in these terms, and it is one of the main characteristic of boundary busters to deny that they actually have these negative character traits. They don't see anything negative in what they do, because they have the attitude that they should be able to do what they want and not be dictated by circumstances and people that put limits on their freedom. Some common examples that reveal this attitude are the following

%3. Your husband doesn't want to go out with you and you withdraw emotionally to punish him.
%3. Your wife asks you to share some of the housekeeping duties and you refuse.
%3. Your husband asks you to spend less and you blame him for not making enough money or giving you so little.
%3. You have a tendency to see many things that you don't like and complain a lot about your situation.
%3. Your husband confronts one of your faults and you blame him for what you do.
%3. Your wife confronts one of your faults and you just reverse the issue.
%3. Your husband wants some time for himself or go out alone with his buddies and you blame him for being selfish and unloving.
%3. Your wife wants to talk about a problem and you just say ``that's your problem".
%3. Your husband disagrees with you and you blow up at him.
%3. Your mood depends a lot on how your spouse behaves and you easily become sulky (and remain so for quite some time).

No matter what the trigger for these reactions is - there is no excuse for them. Believe it or not, in each case you have made a choice that could have been made differently. You may not be aware of it, but you have chosen a reaction that hurts your spouse.

Obviously, since none of us is perfect, our reaction will occasionally be close to one or more of the abovementioned ones. Therefore it is good to examine ourselves **(1. Corinthians 11:28a)** and to check in which of these areas we fail and to do the necessary character work to outgrow our immaturity. The areas where we need to change may involve one or more of the following

%3. Respecting the freedom of your spouse
%3. Allowing your spouse to say no
%3. Admitting that you have been trying to control your spouse either aggressively (by anger) or through manipulation (guilt messages)
%3. Giving honest feedback to your partner without being afraid
%3. Becoming aware of your inability to truly control anyone or anything
%3. Submitting to God's process of learning self-control and acceptance of limits
%3. Restraining your tendency to withdraw from your spouse
%3. Restraining your tendency to attack your spouse or make him feel guilty
%3. Asking for your spouse's feedback when you cross her boundaries
%3. Accepting that your spouse has weaknesses
%3. Admitting faults when being confronted and asking for forgiveness
%3. Forgiving faults of your spouse, even before he repents
%3. Learning to be compassionate with your spouse's (negative) feelings

These tasks are not pleasant and often a lot of work. That is why you haven't done them before. It is realistic to see that growth involves pain. But the painful discipline will eventually bear good results in our lives.

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.
(Hebrews 12:11)

We all have a tendency to resist boundaries to a certain degree. But often we fail to see who we really are until God confronts us with the truth. The Bible gives us a good example in **2. Samuel 12:1-7,13**. One year after committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband, David still has not repented from his sin. God has to send the prophet Nathan to confront him with a story. But although David burns in anger against the man described in this story, he fails to recognize himself in it. Nathan has to spell it out for him: ``You are the man'', to make him see the truth and repent.

Like David, we may not recognize who we are when we read the above descriptions of boundary lovers and boundary busters. We see the failings of others but not our own weaknesses. Before we read on, we should therefore may evaluate yourself by answering the following questions.

%3. *How open are you and your spouse to feedback and truth about yourself?* (Support your answer with concrete evidence from your life).
%3. *Which of the character traits of boundary lovers do you have for sure?* (You need to grow in the others)
%3. *Which of the character traits of boundary busters are you sure not to have?* (You need to overcome in the others)

%3. *Do you worry more about the failings of your spouse than about your own need to grow?*
(You may have a plank problem).

Our answers to these questions may help us identify the areas in which we still need to grow. They may also reveal that our spouses have fewer flaws than we assume and point to areas where we shouldn't experience difficulties with them.

Seeing the truth about ourselves may be a painful experience. But if we are willing to accept this truth and truly repentant, then we are no longer the obstacle to resolving a conflict but have become a part of its solution.

Resolving conflicts with a boundary-loving spouse

Now that we know a bit more about our own and our spouse's willingness to establish and accept boundaries and to endure the pain that sometimes is involved in the growth process, we can look at ways for resolving conflicts in our relationships.

Let us deal with the easy case first - both you and your spouse are boundary lovers. You are aware that you still miss some of the character traits of boundary lovers and that you need improvement. But you do have an attitude of openness and a desire for both of you to experience freedom and love.

If this is the case, you only have one problem to deal with, when a conflict arises between you, as you are able to talk through problems and help each other. The good news in this case is that conflict isn't a bad problem either. In fact, conflict is normal, whenever two people are close to each other. It is part of the growth process: two things come together that are opposed to each other and don't immediately agree. And because of this, both have to be refined until a working compromise has been found **(Proverbs 27:17)**. If you both realize that, working through a conflict can actually be fun. That doesn't mean it's always easy - but you both see the benefits that lie ahead.

In the previous chapters we have discussed specific ways to address the most common kinds of conflicts. In all these suggestions one can see a general pattern for dealing with conflicts, which gives us a biblical strategy for resolving all kinds of conflicts, provided both of us are willing to set and receive boundaries.

Observation

Obviously, you can't fix a problem that you don't see. One of you has to notice the problem and identify it as such. If both of you have God's word dwell in your hearts, you will be able to detect problems and conflicts before they grow into something huge.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom **(Colossians 3:16a)**.*

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ***(Hebrews 4:12)***.

Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path ***(Psalms 119:105)***.

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness ***(2. Timothy 3:16)***.

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever ***(Isaiah 40:8)***.

Living in God's word helps you discern good from bad, real problems from imagined ones, beneficial things from desires that hurt your relationship, and sin from behavior that only disturb our own ways.

Confrontation

Problems usually don't go away by themselves, and you cannot fix them without talking about them. You will not resolve a problem just by wishful thinking. Instead, you have to take action and speak to the issue. If you recognize a problem, you need to speak honestly with your spouse about it.

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another ***(Ephesians 4:25)***.

If the problem is a sin, you need to confront it **(Matthew 18:15, Leviticus 19:17b)** without being judgmental or condemning **(Luke 6:37)**. If your feelings were hurt, don't become angry but instead let your spouse know how you are feeling **(Ephesians 4:31a)**. If your desires are different from those of your spouse, don't hide them but be clear about what you want and that you are willing to find a compromise between the two of you.

Whatever you do to, let your spouse know what the problem is but also make sure you speak the truth *in love*.

Ownership

If you are at least part of the problem, don't deny it, but accept your responsibility for it. If you have sinned or hurt your spouse, confess and apologize.

I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin ***(Psalms 38:18)***.

Therefore confess your sins to one another ***(James 5:16a)***.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ***(1. John 1:8-9)***.

If you are the one who has been hurt, own your hurt, communicate it, but be ready to forgive - that is your responsibility.

Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him. ***(Luke 17:3-4)***.

If you are confronted with a weakness or a problem within yourself, don't blame others, but accept it as yours - only you can work on it

He who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray. ***(Proverbs 10:17)***.

He who ignores instruction despises himself, but he who heeds admonition gains understanding. ***(Proverbs 15:32)***.

Repentance

Once you have seen your part in the problem, realize that there is a need for a change of direction. Repent - change your mind about how to handle things and commit to resolving the issue. Deal with the sin that has been addressed. Take steps to overcome your weaknesses that put a strain on your relationship. Ask a friend to be an accountability partner for you. Allow your spouse to disagree with you and learn to find compromises. Invest into your relationship by postponing gratification. Submit to your spouse - cheerfully, not grudgingly.

Whatever the conflict is, it points at a situation, behavior, or attitude that requires change. Don't continue as before but find out where change is required and commit to it - fully, not just a little bit.

Involvement in the growth process

Problems usually do not go away immediately. Even if you are committed to change everything, you will notice that old habits are difficult to break. Change doesn't come overnight but is the result of a process that may take days, weeks, and sometimes even years. If you want to see growth, you must commit to going through the whole process and to using the resources that are necessary or helpful to making you succeed.

Don't give up if success doesn't come early. Accept outside help, maybe counseling, support groups, or some other form of structured help. Work on the issue together with your spouse.

And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. ***(Ecclesiastes 4:12)***.

Whatever it is that you need to work on, commit to the process that is necessary and stay involved in it. It is for your own growth and the benefit of your relationship.

Reexamination

If you have solved the problem, do not assume it is gone forever.

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.
(Matthew 12:43-45)

It is not enough to focus on removing a problem. We have to fill the void that is created, since otherwise we become vulnerable for all kinds of new problems. Agree on a follow-up plan that prevents the problem from coming back. Get a regular check-up from others to whom you have made yourself accountable. Allow your spouse to confront you if a sin or weakness re-occurs. Whatever the problem was, make sure that early warning symptoms are not being ignored, but give yourself and your spouse enough grace that you do not start controlling each other.

Become proactive! Let new good habits take the place of old bad ones. Learn to address hurt feelings early enough to prevent them from growing into resentment and anger. Replace criticism by words of thanks and after a while even critical thoughts will disappear. Learn to apologize immediately and you will become more open to confrontation. Learn to bring everything before God together and you will see differences in an entirely new light.

Communication

If both you and your spouse are boundary lovers, you are open to truth, responsibility, freedom, and love. Because of that, God will help you to find these things. Remember, however, that conflict can still be painful even for you. Negative things happen in all relationships and they do hurt. And it is not always easy to communicate this hurt without making it sound like an accusation. But there are some basic

guidelines for communication that help keeping a discussion from turning into a severe argument.

%3. *Listen and seek to understand* your spouse before seeking to be understood **(James 1:19, 1. Peter 3:8-9,17, 1. Corinthians 13:4-5)**. Try to understand what your spouse is feeling, wanting, and desiring. That may require suppressing the urge to reply to everything you hear right away. Be patient. Your spouse may need some time to express himself - if you interrupt, you will miss out on some very valuable information.
%3. *Use reflective listening* to make your spouse know that you understand. Active listening confirms to the other that you have understood what he was saying and that you his feelings serious.
%3. *Never ever devalue or explain away* what your spouse is feeling or saying. Even if it is difficult to let negative statements stand for a while - do not defend yourself or others right away. Just listen and make sure you understand the whole picture. You can voice your opinion later.
%3. *Clarify* to make sure that you understand. Don't jump to conclusions if what you hear is unfamiliar to you. Ask questions to fill in details that help you understand what your spouse really tries to tell you.
%3. *Use ``I'' statements* to express that you are taking responsibility for what you feel or want. ``You" statements often come across as blaming, which closes the communication channel between you and your spouse. If you want to communicate is what is going on inside you, stick to exactly that and avoid voicing opinions about your spouse's character.
%3. *Expect your spouse to do the same.* If both of you commit to following the basic rules of communication, there is a good chance that you will understand each other much better.
%3. Last, but not least, *check your own attitude towards your spouse*. Do you make yourself attractive to your husband by working on your inner beauty and character **(1. Peter 3:1-5)** or do you only care for the outside? The latter is worthless without the former, but not the other way around **(Proverbs 11:22, 31:30)**. In the same way, do you treat your wife with love and respect **(1. Peter 3:7, Ephesians 5:33)**? Understanding can only grow in an environment of respect. Otherwise all communication is meaningless.

Do not be afraid of conflict. Conflict is necessary to initiate growth **(Romans 5:3-5, James 1:2-3)** and results in deeper intimacy if you go through it lovingly.

Boundaries aren't always welcome

Resolving conflicts, as we have seen, can be easy if both partners are willing to establish and accept boundaries and to endure the painful discipline that is necessary to overcome difficulties. It becomes more difficult, however, if one mate's reaction to an appropriate limit goes from an ``I don't really like this" to an ``I won't accept this". This is not a natural reaction to pain anymore but a value statement - avoiding pain

has priority over personal growth and solving the real problem together - that says much about the character of the person.

Nobody really likes pain. But a person of good character looks beyond the immediate pain and welcomes it as necessary component of spiritual and emotional growth (recall **Hebrews 12:11**). A person with a problem character, however, refuses to accept that he sometimes needs correction and limits. He isn't willing to carry his load and rather invests all his energy into attacking the limitations set before him - and, sadly enough, also his spouse who is trying to set them (recall **Proverbs 9:8**) - than into addressing the problem that he should really be dealt with.

Unfortunately, many relationships are ``mixed'' with respect to the spouse's views of boundaries. One spouse has learned to accept necessary limitations and puts a high priority on personal growth, out of love for God and his spouse. But the other one does not seem to be interested in disciplining herself or in respecting his boundaries. As a result, the relationship becomes very unbalanced: one spouse has too much responsibility and the other one too little. And the boundary busting partner refuses to work on her own character but rather expects her spouse to change. There is no more growth in the relationship and the problems between the two grow.

What can you do if you find yourself in such a situation? Is there still hope that your relationship will turn into the one that you always desired to have? A relationship that is dominated by mutual love, appreciation, and respect?

I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain ``move from here to there'' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. ***(Matthew 17:20)***

No matter what your situation is - there is always hope. If you have faith in God, trust in his word, and do what it says **(James 1:22)**, then every problem can be overcome with patience and endurance. It doesn't matter if your faith is small - the only thing that counts is in whom you have faith.

But here is the bad news - it's going to be hard work. No matter on which side of the unbalanced relationship you are, *you* are the one who needs to deal with it. And that is not going to be easy. Actually, it is not even easy to teach this, because we have to talk about a variety of unpleasant issues to get at the root of the problem.

If you are the one who uses to resists boundaries, you have some hard character work to do. If you want your relationship to improve, you need to examine and very likely to adjust your priorities, because they are certainly out of balance. If love of God and your spouse, compassion and forgiveness, honesty and truth, faithfulness, and holiness do not rank highly in your personal values, then your wish for a deep and loving relationship will remain ...just a wish, nothing more, because *what you value is what you get.* In other words, if you value other things higher than love, then you can't

expect to find true love in your relationship. You may find these other things, but you will also realize that they don't really fulfill you.

But - if you have realized that you are the boundary buster in your relationship you have gone the first important step - you have faced your own reality and accepted the pain that comes with seeing who you really are. There are two ways to deal with that pain - you try to make it easier by forgetting what you have seen and end up with the same problems as before, still knowing in the back of your mind that you are causing many of them. Or you can repent, go back to the chapter on values (Chapter 8), and commit to making a major adjustment in your priorities. Remember, nothing will be impossible for you if you submit to God's way of making you grow up. And your spouse is your ally - not your enemy - when he sets unpleasant, but necessary boundaries before you.

The following discussions may help you gain some insights into your character and show you possible causes for your behavior and weaknesses that you may have to address. However, from now on we will describe everything as if talking to the one who has to deal with a boundary resistant parter and is willing to go the necessary steps.

If you are the partner who is willing to accept discipline and limitations and to endure the pain that sometimes comes with the growth process, but - after a careful and honest examination - have to realize that your spouse does not see these things the same way you do, you have a lot of work before you. You can't make your spouse grow up against her will. You only can work on yourself and do everything in your power to make your relationship grow - and that without expecting too much cooperation from your spouse, at least not initially. But again, nothing will be impossible if you submit to God's way of doing things. The steps you have to go may be difficult and unpleasant, because at times you have to be very firm with your spouse and ask yourself if you're doing the right thing, but if you follow God's path, you will eventually see the positive results of your efforts.

Distinguish between ignorance and selfishness

First of all, you have to make sure that the symptoms you observe in your spouse really point at a character issue and not just at ignorance. Your spouse may simply not be aware that he is overstepping your boundaries and that his behavior is hurtful or irritating to you. Ignorance is not the same as selfishness.

There is an easy way to find out. When confronted with the issue, the ignorant spouse will often respond positively, while a truly boundary-resistant spouse will react defensively. If your spouse was ignorant about the consequences of his behavior, he will feel deep remorse for causing you pain and will change his behavior or attitude quickly out of love for you.

The difficulty with ignorance, however, is that your spouse is really not aware of the pain he causes even if that may be extremely obvious to others. Therefore it is not helpful to try to convince him that he is doing something wrong - he doesn't see it that

way or he would do otherwise. Instead, let him know how you feel when he violates your boundaries and what it is that hurts you.

Remember, that love always hopes and believes **(1. Corinthians 13:7)**. Approach conflicts with your spouse first as if they were ignorance issues, not character problems. You will find out quickly whether you are right or not **(Proverbs 9:8, 13:1, 15:5)**. If you are, you spouse will love you for gently making him aware of his failings and make the necessary changes. If he resists, you will know that you have to deal with a much bigger problem first.

How the boundary buster sees the issue

One of the greatest problems in a ``boundary-mixed" relation is that the boundary loving partner does not understand the perspective of the boundary resistant one. He cannot comprehend how people can put such a low priority on inner values such as love, compassion, forgiveness, honesty, faithfulness, and holiness, and is not willing to grow in these areas if that requires discipline and self-limitation in other areas. He is often surprised or even shocked to learn how different his own spouse thinks and feels about this matter. Understanding the viewpoint of your boundary-resistant spouse will help you go the right steps and avoid mistakes in the process.

One of the key attitudes of people who don't respect other's boundaries is that they *should be able to do what they want*. They see ultimate freedom as their right that should not be restricted by anyone. Like Adam and Eve and millions of people after them, they refuse to accept that they are creatures with limitations and restrictions and not God the creator himself. They feel entitled to a richly blessed life without trials and difficulties and complain whenever this is not so. They want to tell God what he needs to do for them instead of accepting the the path that he sets before them. All this is an attitude that one would expect only in small children, hoping that they will mature out of it as they grow up **(1. Corinthians 13:11)**. However, this doesn't always happen and even Christians can be very immature **(1. Corinthians 3:1-3, 14:20)**.

It is important to realize this doesn't mean that the boundary resistant partner is a bad person otherwise. In fact, your spouse may be a wonderful and loving person under normal circumstances, who feels genuinely drawn to you and cares deeply for you. For the people around you there is often not the slightest hint that there are problems between the two of you. But whenever boundary issues arise, she doesn't act like a mature person anymore: the good feelings for you are gone and anger, guilt messages, or acting out take their place.

The boundary-resistant spouse reacts this way because his thoughts and feelings center around what he *wants* and not around what his responsibilities are. As a result, he feels that the limit you try to establish is unfair. In fact, he sees any limit on his freedom as unreasonable and hurtful. How can anyone be so mean to say no to him in areas that are so important to him? He feels that the request to limit himself for the sake of growth in the relationship means that his spouse doesn't love him anymore.

When you have to deal with a boundary-resistant spouse, keep in mind that he feels that he should be able to do what he wants. As long as he has not grown out of this childish attitude, he will challenge and protest any boundary that you set before him,

because boundaries say that *you cannot do what you want all the time*. Since you have to expect a lot of resistance, you have to be sure that the boundaries you are trying to establish are appropriate. Otherwise you will find it very difficult not to give in to the complaints and protests.

Your own life needs scrutiny as well

Before you look for ways how to deal with your boundary-resistant spouse, make sure that you deal with the planks in your own eye **(Matthew 7:5)**. The fact that your spouse is a boundary buster, who sometimes behaves immature or even childish, doesn't make her any worse a person than you are. She only has the more obvious problems while you look very innocent in comparison. Beware of becoming judgmental and condemning when you figure this out and try to be merciful and forgiving not just in what you say and do but also in your thoughts **(Luke 6:37, James 2:12-13)**. Remember that you are a sinner too and have much to repent of. Here is a small list of ``planks'' that partners of boundary-resistant spouses should examine before looking at the flaws of their spouse.

%3. Pretending that everything is all right
%3. Not speaking the truth **(Ephesians 4:25)**
%3. Withdrawing instead of confronting the issues
%3. Not following up with consequences
%3. Nagging
%3. Being passively revengeful
%3. Being self-righteous and condemning **(Luke 18:10-14)**
%3. Gossiping about your spouse instead of telling him your feelings

Make sure that you deal with these problems in yourself first. As you grow in these areas, you become a more lovable person who is more firmly rooted in her faith. If your spouse becomes aware of that, he may let go of his resistance to the boundaries you are trying to set. But even if he doesn't, your basis for the steps that you need to go has become much stronger.

Causes for Boundary Resistance

Dealing with boundary resistant people can be very difficult, as their attitude towards self-discipline and limitations is not what one would expect from a mature adult. There may be a variety of reasons for that. These reasons cannot be taken as excuses, but understanding them will help you find the right way to approach the issues with your boundary resistant spouse.

Empathic failure

To accept boundaries, a person must be able to see the effects of his actions on others. If we fail others, we should feel godly sorrow **(2. Corinthians 7:10)** and compassion for the hurt we cause them. As a consequence we try to treat those we love as we would like to be treated by them **(Matthew 7:12)**.

However, some people have difficulty becoming aware of their effect on people. They may do all the right things but they can't sense the feelings of others. A wife may tell her husband how tough some his behavior is for her and he simply doesn't understand what her problem is. Like Mr. Spock of the old *Star Trek* series, he may be mystified by her ``irrational'' feelings.

People who struggle with understanding feelings often appear detached, arrogant, and self-absorbed. Fortunately, this is usually not the case. Opening up the world of emotions and relationships to such a spouse may be very helpful.

Although your emotions are very plain to you, you may have to explain them to him, if you want him to grasp what is going on inside you. For instance, saying ``I hate it that you spend so much time on the computer'' may leave him totally clueless while telling him ``I feel lonely, when you go straight to the computer when you come home'', can be an eye-opener for him. For you, both statements may mean the same. But in the first statement you only show him the aggressive outside of your emotions and pushed him away from you, while the second statement shows him your vulnerable inside and asked for his compassion.

In the same way, you can help him learn to open his own feelings to you and connect in vulnerable ways to you. For instance, in a situation that would make you feel hurt and angry, you may invite him to confess his pain by letting him know how you would feel and asking him how he felt about it. Don't press it, but if he does open up, make sure that you are compassionate with the emotions he shares - even if they are very different from yours. Otherwise you only strengthen his belief that emotions are irrational experiences that should not be shared.

Irresponsibility

Some spouses clearly sense the effects of their actions on others but have a low sense of ownership for them. Like a small child, they feel that they should be able to do what they want and do not feel responsible for the consequences. They don't see their life as their own problem - it is someone else's.

Ever since the fall, humans have struggled with this character issue: ``This wasn't my fault - someone else is responsible'' **(Genesis 3:12-13)**. No one takes responsibility for his life gracefully - it has to be built by many painful experiences **(Romans 5:3-5, James 1:2-3)**. But some people have escaped the hard lessons of life because they always found somebody else to rescue them. They always blame others for what happens to them and they seem unable to learn from failure. A husband who has problems with his temper may blame others for making him angry. A wife who overspends may complain that she just does not enough money. A spouse who is chronically late may always have the excuse that other people kept him from coming on time.

There are many excuses for irresponsibility. However, behind every irresponsible spouse there is a safety net - either in the past or in the present. As long as this safety net is allowed to remain, such a person will hardly change his attitude - why should he? To make your spouse see that *he*, not others, is the major cause for his problems, you need to surround him with supportive, but firm people to teach him ownership

and self-control. These people may be a friends, a support group, or a Bible study. Don't try to do this alone - if you have enabled him before, chances are that you will do it again in the future.

Inability to stay free when receiving limits

Some spouses may be unable to accept confrontation and consequences because they have a split in their soul: freedom, love, and submission are concepts that they cannot see integrated. When a husband asks his wife to limit herself for the sake of a common future goal, she may feel that her freedom is at risk if she submits to his request. Giving up even a bit of her freedom makes her feel helpless and vulnerable, so she rebels against the proposed limitations and becomes angry at him.

Quite often, such a spouse comes from an enmeshing family, she had to struggle greatly to be able to make her own decisions and choices. Disagreement was not welcome at home and usually led to withdrawal of love or other forms of ``punishment''. As a consequence, she has never learned to accept limits out of *her own choice*. For her, any disagreement feels like an offense; limits and submission are a matter of control and not an issue of love **(Ephesians 5:21)**. So when her husband asks her to limit herself, she feels that he is trying to control her and reacts against him.

Such spouses need help in preserving their freedom and choices while freely choosing to respond to limits without jeopardizing that freedom. Let your spouse know that you want her to be free to disagree and to say no to you, but that you also want the freedom to express your requests without her blowing up at you.

Desire to be in control

Some people have grown up believing that there can only be one way to do things right and that they know what the right way is. They are unable to see their spouse as having separate and equal feelings and ideas. Instead of mutually solving problems, they negate the freedom of their spouse to be different and often come across as controlling, manipulating, or dominating their partners.

Common examples are the husband, who threatens his wife when she disagrees. He directly assaults her freedom, intending to make her comply and submit to his opinion or desires, and even quotes Ephesians 5:22 to justify this demand. All this reduces a loving connection between the two to a fear-based dominance. Another example would be the wife who uses guilt messages to assault boundaries. When her husband wants her to become responsible and stops enabling her, she blames him for being distant and unloving.

Spouses who try to control others either aggressively or through manipulation need to learn that their lack of responsibility hurts them even more that others. Controlling people have lost their freedom, because they have become dependent on the compliance of others. Usually they feel miserable if this does not happen. To overcome their controlling attitude, they need your love, confrontation with the truth **(John 8:32)**, consequences, and maybe even the intervention of others to see that their behavior is destructive and must change.

Denial of imperfection

Some people can admit that their way is not the only way but refuse to admit weaknesses and faults. They desire not to be seen as ``wrong'' or ``bad'' and often react defensively to correction'. When their spouse confronts them about a certain issue, they deny the offense (``*I never do that''*), rationalize or minimize it (``*you're overreacting''*), blame their spouse (``*you made me do this''*), reverse the issue (``*you do the same''*), or try other ways to avoid owning their fault.

There may be several reasons why people cannot admit weaknesses and faults. They may have a judgmental attitude and try to escape from their own a harsh and condemning conscience that results from that **(Luke 6:37)**. They may be unable to grasp their own sinfulness **(Matthew 15:19, Psalm 14:3, Genesis 8:21)** and try to protect their ``good self''. Or they may have a deep sense of entitlement not to be challenged. Whatever the reason, they avoid taking responsibility of their own badness and feel wronged by any form of correction.

Spouses who deny imperfection are still like children who have not yet learned from the pain they experience when crossing a boundary. Instead of recognizing that the boundary is necessary and that they are the ones who are wrong, they feel treated unfairly. They are unaware of how hurtful their boundary-crossing can be.

Spouses with this problem need two things. They need consequences when they hurt others, to become aware of their faults; and they need a safe way to explore their own bad parts, to admit weaknesses and faults, and to experience forgiveness.

Retaliation

Some marriages are troubled by a spouse who has the urge to retaliate whenever he feels wronged. Instead of forgiving the perceived (or real) transgression, he takes an eye for an eye **(Exodus 21:24)**, believing that he has the right to do so, and often even escalates the wrongdoing. This attitude can create tremendous problems in a relationship.

The most common form of retaliation takes place whenever a couple has an argument. One (perceived) insult leads to another and a minor issue suddenly turns into a major fight. Fortunately, most couples realize quickly what they are doing, stop the escalation, and apologize. Sometimes, however, one spouse lets the situation escalate and major damage is done before the argument finally ends. Many cases of domestic violence are the result of escalating retaliation.

Similarly, irresponsibility can escalate. A husband may retaliate for his spouse's uncontrolled spending by buying expensive things that the family cannot afford. A wife may punish her husband for always being late for dinner by becoming tardy herself.

All these are ungodly reactions to hurt. Whether the transgression is real or not, revenge is not an option. You may feel justifiably hurt and angry about your spouse's behavior. Yet, avenging yourself is sin. Revenge belongs to God, not to you

(Deuteronomy 32:35). Take your hurt to God and let him heal it (possibly with the help of other people) and then learn to solve the problem that caused it.

Transference

Sometimes the intimacy of a close relationship can revive old, unresolved feelings about other relationships with parents, siblings, close friends, or other people. A spouse may suddenly have feelings towards her partner that are about someone else, not about him.

For example, a wife may feel reminded of her critical and controlling father whenever her husband is trying to bring up an issue between them. As a consequence she feels that he is trying to control her and reacts negatively. But in reality, her negative feelings are not about her husband or about the boundary he is trying to establish but projections of her negative feelings towards her father that are still in her heart.

People who experience this confusing state of *transference* usually get along very well with their spouses as long as no conflicts are being brought up and often it takes quite some time to find out why resolving conflicts is so difficult for them. To overcome this problem they need to work through their feelings towards significant other people and learn to forgive things that have happened in the past, so that they can't burden them anymore in the present.

Resistance in specific contexts

Some spouses are correctable, responsible, empathic, and respectful to boundaries in all areas but one. There is only one ``pocket area'' - time, money, in-laws, communication, sex, or parenting, etc. - that becomes a no-man's land for conflicts. Whenever an issue is brought up in this area, it tends to bring out emotional outbreaks and fights, but conflict itself remains unresolved. Over the time the couple learns to skirt around the problem area. But nevertheless it causes a certain distance in an otherwise loving relationship.

There may be several reasons for such a situation.

%3. *Lack of experience:* A spouse may simply have no clue how this area affects the other person.
%3. *Past hurts:* A spouse may have had very negative experience in this area and therefore reacts much stronger.
%3. *Hidden character issues:* A spouse may have a deeper character problem that can be controlled in most areas and becomes visible only in a few situations.

Whatever the cause, the presenting problem is rarely the real one, but more likely the fruit of it **(Matthew 7:17-20, Mark 7:23)**. A couple may have to look more deeply into their relationship and the hearts of both spouses, and ask God to reveal their hidden faults to them **(Psalm 19:12)**.

Understanding the reasons why you or your spouse have problems with self-discipline and limitations, will help you find the right way to approach the issues that you need to resolve. Your spouse hardly resists your boundaries out of evil intentions. But he does have some character problems that need to be worked on. He must learn to accept boundaries and limitations as something positive for his personal growth and the growth of the relationship. Although he has to do the character work mostly by himself, he probably will not do so unless you help him get started.

Resolving conflicts with a boundary-resistant spouse

Now that we understand some reasons why our spouses resists, ignores, or minimizes our boundaries although they are aware of our feelings and concerns, we have to ask ourselves what we can do about it. The situation is difficult, because our spouses will very likely not cooperate. On the contrary, we have to expect that they will attack our boundaries and try to resist every change that we are trying to introduce. They may start arguments, have tantrums, and even hate us **(Proverbs 9:8a)** for introducing the world of boundaries to them. Sometimes they let the situation escalate and we will ask ourselves if trying to establish boundaries is really the right thing, and more than once we are tempted to give in - only to find out again that this doesn't improve the situation at all.

Dealing with such issues will be very hard work, but probably also the most productive thing that you will ever do for your marriage. The situation is not hopeless (recall **Matthew 17:20**). Although you can't approach it as if you and your spouse were a team, you are certainly not alone. You have God, and you hopefully have friends who support you.

In this section we want to discuss ways to deal with a boundary-resistant spouse in a caring, yet truthful manner.

Things to avoid

Before considering concrete steps to resolve boundary issues with your spouse, you should become aware of the things that will not help but only make the situation worse. Here is a small list of things that you should not do.

%3. *Don't deny or minimize the situation*. Hiding from a significant problem does not change reality.
%3. *Don't ignore the problem*, hoping the situation will improve by itself. Time alone does not solve character issues. They need to be worked on.
%3. *Don't become more compliant or pleasing*. Although love is patient and kind **(1. Corinthians 13:4)**, it does not enable evil **(1. Corinthians 13:6a)**. Character issues demand not only love, but also firmness. Consider the example of Jesus: although he was the most loving person ever to live on earth, he could be very firm when it came to addressing significant problems **(John 2:13-16, 4:16-18, Matthew 23:13-36)**.
%3. *Don't be constantly surprised at your spouse's behavior*. Boundary-resistant people have no reason to change as long as it is more comfortable for them to

stay as they are. Don't expect any changes within your relationship until you initiate them yourself.

%3. *Don't nag*. Repeating the same protest over and over again will not change your spouse's attitude but only drive him away further **(Proverbs 21:9, 21:19, 25:24, 27:15)**.
%3. *Don't even think of blaming your spouse*, thinking that she is ``your biggest problem''. As long as you believe this, you will be guaranteed only more misery. Very few marriage problems involve one all-innocent and one all-guilty party. As long as you don't take ownership of your part of the problem, you're not ready to resolve the real issue **(Matthew 7:5)**.
%3. *Don't try to solve the problems of your spouse*. They are not yours, so you shouldn't take total ownership for them and rescue your partner from his part **(Proverbs 19:19)**.
%3. *Don't try to solve the problem all by yourself*. As long as you are on your own you may easily be overwhelmed by the problem and not be able to recover **(Ecclesiastes 4:10b, 4:12a)**.
%3. *Don't address all issues at once*. It is very discouraging for anyone to learn that everything is wrong with him. Why should he even try to change if you don't believe he is any good at all? Instead of giving your spouse a huge list of problems all at once, bring them up one at a time, starting with the really important ones.
%3. *Don't give up* **(1. Corinthians 13:7-8a)**.

Preparation

Dealing with a boundary-resistant spouse can be hard work, which requires you to avoid certain reactions that may come naturally but only make things worse. What then, can you do to resolve issues with your spouse while approaching her with grace and truth?

Two aspects are important: creating an environment that makes it easier for you to successfully deal with the issues at stake, and the actual confrontation during which you request change, establish boundaries, and follow through with consequences. Although the actual character work has to be done by your spouse, these steps will help her get started.

Establishing soul connections with God and other people

is one of the most important things for any Christian **(Proverbs 17:17, 18:24, 27:6, James 2:23)**, but it is even more important when you face conflicts with your spouse. You will encounter plenty of conflict when you try to address issues with a boundary-resistant partner. Your spouse will test your limits, become angry, withdraw, try to make you feel guilty, or punish your attempts to establish limits with extreme reactions. All this will threaten the closeness between the two of you.

If the only deep connection residing in your soul is your spouse, the chances for real progress are very low. When your spouse withdraws love, you will feel lonely and loveless; and you may be tempted to comply only to stay connected. Therefore you need to establish healthy, safe, and honest soul connections with God and other people before you attempt a confrontation with your spouse. Friends are a resource for comfort, encouragement, strength, and accountability during the stress of conflict resolution in your marriage **(recall Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)**. And a deep and trusting relationship between you and God can carry you through difficult times **(Psalm 23)**.

Work on your spiritual and emotional growth.

Obviously, you should not establish a deep soul connection only to become strong enough to set limits in your marriage. God wants you to use these relationship as a means to grow spiritually and emotionally.

Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up in him who is the head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds himself up in love as each part does its work ***(Ephesians 4:15-16)***.

As you open up to Him and other people, you will deal with old hurts and failures, become more honest, able to forgive and let go. While you try to help a difficult spouse learn about love and responsibility, you will grow in these capacities yourself.

Many things can happen that help you prepare for addressing the issues with your spouse. You may discover why your spouse has this particular issue. You may realize why you had difficulties establishing and keeping limits. You may find out that you are guilty of one or several of the ``don't do" items above and learn how to correct this. You may learn how to confront issues without making the person feel attacked. Most of all you may learn how to receive love and support when you fail and need encouragement and feedback.

Identify the specific issue.

Once you have established deep relationships with God and other people and begun your personal growth process, you will need to find out what the specific issues are between you and your spouse. This involves several aspects and you should ask yourself the following questions.

%3. What boundary is being violated?

%3. How does it affect you and your love for your spouse? Do you feel hurt and distant from your spouse?
%3. Is the problem an occasional event or a regular pattern?
%3. Does the problem require a change in behavior or a change in character?
%3. Is it important enough for you to risk a conflict over it?

Particularly the last question is difficult to answer, since you have to weigh your desire for peace in your relationship against the damage that is created by not dealing with the issue. You need to keep a cool head and focus on the most important issues first, addressing them one at a time. If you try to address everything at once, your spouse may feel overwhelmed by your expectations and not even try to start the necessary character work.

In general, it is better to request the deeper attitude changes first. A specific behavior is only a symptom that shows what is going on in person's heart **(Matthew 15:19)**, so solving the character issues helps changing the outward behavior.

Also, asking for internal changes helps you learn about your spouses true attitude towards boundaries. If she is boundary-friendly, she will want to change and may request your help. If she is boundary-resistant, she will deny, become angry, rationalize, or blame - in short, negate your request. This is the nature of resistance: an opposition to owning an issue.

Sometimes, your spouse's resistance to your request for internal changes requires you to deal with specific behavioral issues first and then come back to the more important issues after you have made progress in the other ones.

Validate your spouse.

Before you can ask your spouse to make changes you have to convince her that you understand her perspective and that you always have her best interests in mind. Nobody likes having to make character changes in the first place, but it becomes even more difficult if she has the feeling that you don't respect her point of view and the efforts she is making. She would feel misunderstood and criticized without being heard. If this is the case all your requests just come across as attempts to control her and it is unlikely that you will receive a positive response.

*In everything do to others what you would have them do to you **(Matthew 7:12)**.*

Think about how you want to be approached if your spouse wants you to change your behavior. Wouldn't it be much easier to do if she appreciates that you are trying your best, although you make mistakes, and expresses that you are important to her?

In **Revelation 2:2-5** God gives us a wonderful example how to soften the burden of change. First, he validates the hard work and perseverance of the church in Ephesus.

He lets the church know how much he appreciates their efforts. Yet he also requests change. But he only addresses the issue after letting the church know that they are valuable to him. And he expresses his appreciation again after having corrected their mistake.

The more difficult the problem is that you are trying to resolve with your spouse, the more important it is to validate and encourage her. Validation involves several dimensions:

%3. You express that her feelings are important to you. What is her perspective of the problem and how does she feel about the conflict?
%3. You want to understand her point of view. Does she believe you're overreacting when you want to see change and that it is really not that bad? If she senses that you respect her view (even if you don't agree) it is easier to negotiate a solution.
%3. You respond to what is actually true about her view. Maybe she is right in saying that you haven't said anything about the issue for weeks and suddenly demand an immediate change. Admitting that you made mistakes in the way you approached her does not make your request less valid. In fact, it will probably make her aware that you do are not her adversary but that you actually listen to what she says. So even if it appears like a diversion to the real issue, accept it and admit your mistakes. That way you will deal with the ``diversion'' much quicker. On the other hand, when you deny that she has got a point here, you will probably start a long discussion and never get to the real issue.

Validating your spouse is not easy, particularly when she constantly resists boundaries that are important to you. But you will experience little progress if she doesn't believe you can't convince her.

Love is the goal.

The purpose of resolving conflicts is not to win an argument, but to be closer to your spouse. Boundaries are about protecting love, not about showing people their evil ways and forcing them to change. You are not the judge of your spouse but his partner and he needs to understand that your prime motive for requesting change is enhancing or even repairing the loving feeling between you.

If your partner feels that you attack his person instead of an issue, that you make him the bad guy, condemn him, or punish him, then there is little chance that he will really make the changes you desire. Maybe he changes something on the outside, but his character won't change.

Dear friends, let us love one another for love comes from God. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among

us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. ***(1. John 4:7, 16b-18)***.

Love comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith
(1. Timothy 1:5).

Help him see that you need and love him, and that the boundary issue is an obstacle to the love you desire to give and receive. For instance, when you tell him that his chronic lateness distances you, you should also say that you want to solve this because you want to be close again. When you let him know that you can't feel love when he dismisses your feelings, tell him that you desire to feel love. Let him know that you don't want to control or criticize him but that you are trying to solve a problem so that love can reign. Show him that your goal is love and that you value the connection between you above all.

Earn the right to require change.

The most difficult aspect of resolving conflicts is that you have to earn the right to require your spouse to change. Ask God to search your heart **(Psalm 139:23-24)** and to reveal to you where you are contributing to the problem and then make all the necessary changes. This way you create a level playing field: your spouse sees that you do not try to remove a speck from his eye while leaving the plank in yours **(Matthew 7:3-5)** but that you actually do your share. Even if your spouse is the main cause of the problem and your contribution to it appears minimal, you should never appear as setting yourself up as the perfect person who has the right to judge her partner. That destroys his motivation to change and is wrong before God: we don't have the right to judge each other.

The hard news is that you should make your changes regardless of your spouse's willingness to make the changes that he should do. That may sound unfair, but it is one of the most important realities in life. Do not depend on our spouse's behavior, but do what is right and helps you grow. Whether your spouse grows as well or not must not influence your personal growth.

For instance, your husband may be a very dominant person while you have a tendency to comply and withdraw. Obviously it would be easier for you to be more assertive if he would less bossy. And he may be kinder if you learn to be more up front. But the fact is that you have a problem that you need to work on: your tendency to withdraw. It is your responsibility to God to change that, no matter what your husband does. Your growth is between you and God alone.

Confrontation

Once you have learned to keep the above elements in mind whenever you approach your spouse, you are ready to deal with the issue.

Request specific change.

If your bother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over ***(Matthew 18:15)***.

You can't expect change if you don't confront your spouse and request change. But when you bring up the issues, be clear and specific. Your spouse needs to know to know exactly what you is expected from him. By being clear about that you have transferred some of the responsibility for dealing with the problem to him.

Where there is no law, there is no transgression ***(Romans 4:15)***

When you talk to your spouse, stick to clearly identifiable issues. It is your responsibility to let him know what you want him to do. Avoid generalities, but be specific instead. If you want him to take more initiative in parenting or to take over some of the household chores (now that both of you are working), don't just tell him that you wish that he would be more helpful. If you feel that he belittles you in front of others, don't just say that you want him to be more loving. Changes are very difficult to make if one doesn't know what it is that needs to be changed.

Allow time to respond.

Once you made your request, you cannot expect change immediately. Maybe it is the first time that you brought up the issue appropriately, and he may not be used to your being honest, direct, and specific about what you don't like in your relationship. So far you have enabled his behavior. Now you are changing the rules and your spouse needs time to make the necessary adjustments.

Be patient and allow time to observe his response, evaluate yourself, your spouse, and what happens between you. Things may be easier than you believe, as your clarity and the time to adapt maybe all your spouse needs. If so, you have won him over **(Matthew 18:15)**. It is definitely worth waiting a while to find out.

Establish appropriate consequences.

Stating your request and allowing time, however, may not be enough. Ever since the fall, people have known the rules and still crossed the line **(Genesis 3:6)**, as the benefits of doing so were appealing for some reason or the other. In the same way, the benefits that your spouse receives when violating your boundaries may far outweigh the value that your appeals and requests have for him. If this is the case, you *need* to set consequences.

What does that mean? Consequences are the ``natural'' effects of some act, like falling down when you jump out of a window. You need to establish some consequence for your spouse's transgression so that he will experience some discomfort for his irresponsibility. For instance, you may leave the room or even the house for a period of time until your spouse ceases his temper tantrums. You may open separate accounts if your spouse doesn't quit overspending, so that some base amount of money is safe. You may leave an event if your spouse doesn't stop demeaning you in public. You may stop cleaning up after your spouse as long as he continues to be excessively messy. If your spouse has an affair, you may require him to leave the home until the affair is over and counseling has begun.

There are plenty of possible consequences for different boundary violations, but choosing the one that is appropriate for your situation is not easy, since you certainly don't want to do something that damages your relationship. Here are some guidelines that you need to keep in mind.

%3. Consequences are there to *protect you*, not to control or change your spouse. They allow appropriate cause and effect, but the your spouse still needs the freedom to choose - even if he chooses to endure the consequences rather than changing his behavior.
%3. Consequences are *reactions to your spouse's behavior* not attempts to make him behave in a certain way. This is not in your power, so any consequence of the kind ``if you ... then you have to'' or ``don't do ... or I will make you'' is totally useless.
%3. Consequences are *deliberate* actions and *never to be set in anger*. They are not about getting even or punishing your spouse but shall help you get out of enabling irresponsibility. Before you set them, think them through in prayer and with friends.
%3. Consequences should *relate to the nature of the transgression*. It makes sense to leave the room when you spouse has temper tantrums, since no one likes to be around when people are enraged. But it does not make sense to stop doing the laundry for two weeks, as these two things have nothing to do with each other.
%3. Consequences have to be *appropriately severe* - severe enough to matter but not so severe that they, rather than the behavior you want to address, become the issue. Leaving the room when your spouse becomes enraged during an argument *may* be appropriate - moving out is certainly not. It is the other way around if your spouse becomes physically abusive every time you have an argument.
%3. Consequences must be *enforceable*. Don't announce consequences that you won't be able to follow through with anyway. If you can't tell the pastor that you have trouble in your marriage, don't threaten to do that. Don't threaten to move out when you don't know where to go. Your spouse will find out quickly

that you don't have the power or resources to enforce the consequences and simply ignore your threats.

%3. Consequences must follow *as immediately as possible*. This is not only important when dealing with children but also with adults. Your spouse must see the link between his action and the consequence. If he becomes enraged during an argument, you need to leave the room right away or not at all. It doesn't make sense thinking about what happened and then start avoiding him the next day when everything is over.

%3. Consequences must remain *respectful your spouse* **(Ephesians 5:21, 1. Peter 3:1-2,7)**. Stay away from humiliating or punitive consequences such as making sarcastic remarks or making fun of his weaknesses. This is retaliation and will certainly not bring the two of you closer together.

%3. Consequences must be *modified as the situation changes*. If your spouse repents, you can relax the consequences **(2. Corinthians 2:5-8)**. However, be sure that the change is genuine has truly occurred of some period of time. A simple ``I am sorry'' may mean nothing and should not be enough to let go of the consequence right away (contrast **1. Samuel 15:19-26** with **2. Samuel 12:11-14**).

   On the other hand, you may have to increase the severity of the consequence if the behavior of your spouse becomes worse **(Matthew 18:15-17)**. For instance, you may have to get friends or your pastor involved if the temper tantrums of your spouse grow beyond what you can handle alone.

%3. Most importantly, consequences *must be announced ahead of time*.

When I say to a wicked man ``you will surely die'' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.
(Ezekiel 3:18-19, see also the book of ***Jonah)***

Never apply consequences without giving appropriate warning. Your spouse must be aware that from now on you will begin to set limits. That gives him a chance to repent before suffering the consequences and demonstrates to him that you don't want to punish him but like to see the problem solved. If you react impulsively or plan your consequence in secret and suddenly come out with a ``because you did ... I will now'', you exercise punishment instead of giving him a the choice to change.

Follow through.

Once you have set a limit, you need to follow through with it. Otherwise your spouse will rightfully believe that he can do whatever he wants and all he has to endure is

your nagging, which is what you do when you only announce consequences. Don't write a check with your mouth that your actions can't cash.

Obviously, you may encounter problems when you are trying to follow through. Guilt feelings, fear of loss of love or that your spouse may escalate his behavior may cause you to hesitate. This is why you need to surround yourself with friends who love you, encourage you, help you to assure you of the rightness of your stance, and help you correct mistakes in the process.

Observe and evaluate over time.

Once you have begun following through with consequences, you have to allow time again to see changes. Some people only have to suffer consequences a few time to get the message that irresponsibility and selfishness is painful and destructive. Others need more time or different consequences. If you allow enough time, you will learn to understand your spouse better.

Sadly enough, some people have no interest in changing at all and want to live a life unaffected by the feelings and hurts of others. Such behavior grieves God **(Matthew 23:37)**, but he gives people even the freedom to be selfish and hurtful, because only the freedom to choose can lead to genuine repentance. If this is your situation, understand that your boundaries are primarily for your protection and only secondarily for changing the behavior of your spouse.

What if it escalates?

Don't be shocked if your spouse escalates the behavior that troubles you instead of giving in. Children do that all the time to test how serious their parents really are and your spouse may not yet have outgrown this childish attitude. Your spouse may become angry, have more temper tantrums, send more guilt messages, or become more of a spendthrift. Be prepared for this. Warn again, stick to your consequences consistently, or make them stricter. Some spouses get the message after a few escalations - others may test you longer.

Be prepared to be resented when you set boundaries. Anger and hatred towards the one who rebukes them is a typical reaction of irresponsible people **(Proverbs 9:8a)**. Your spouse is angry with you for saying no to her. Make sure you handle this anger with gentle firmness. Understand where the anger comes from. Try not to react to it but also do not back off an appropriate boundary just to stop the resentment. If you do, you have enabled irresponsibility once again.

This will not be easy, as everyone wants his spouse to love him. Therefore it is important that God and other people fill you up with love and support to replace the hopefully temporary loss of love in your relationship.

Normalize your doubts.

When your spouse starts assaulting your boundaries, becomes angry, blames you, or intensifies her resistance, you may begin questioning yourself if you're doing the right thing. Are you being unfair, selfish, or unloving? Are you overreacting or secretly trying to punish your spouse? Is establishing boundaries and consequences really wise for your situation or does your spouse need another change before you follow through?

Don't be surprise when such questions come up. After all, you may be trying to set boundaries for the first time and it is all very new for you. Doubts are normal in these situations Also, your love for your spouse will always make you question your motives. This is a good thing and you should try to answer these questions by thinking them through thoroughly. Setting limits with the person you love most is a serious endeavor and should not be taken lightly. Settle the questions, make the necessary adjustments, and continue the process.

What if the other spouse wants to leave?

Sadly enough, some situations continue to escalate and may reach a state that simply becomes unbearable for you. What can you do? Is there any chance to avoid the ultimate consequence - divorce?

Although many counselors and even pastors suggest divorce when things become really bad, divorce does not fix the problems of a marriage. It simply ends the relationship. Although God does permit divorce in certain circumstances such as adultery **(Matthew 5:31-32)** or desertion by an unbelieving spouse **(1. Corinthians 7:15)**, divorce is not a part of God's plan for a marriage.

*I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel **(Malachi 2:16)**.*

*Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate **(Matthew 19:6)**.*

*A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife **(1. Corinthians 7:10-11)**.*

For a Christian, divorce should not be an option that you should actively consider. Boundaries are meant to be carried within the marital framework. Divorce takes the your relationship problems outside of this framework and destroys almost any change for solving them. The boundaries you establish should aim at saving your relationship and re-establishing the love between you and your spouse, not at destroying them.

However, that doesn't mean that you should abandon appropriate boundaries if your spouse threatens with divorce, provided you constantly evaluate your boundaries and consequences before God in prayer.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances: God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ***(1. Corinthians 7:15-16)***

If you have tried everything to rebuild your marriage, but your spouse chooses to leave you rather than working through your marriage problems, you are not obliged to fight for the continuation of your marriage or to appease him by abandoning the boundaries that you need to protect your person. How do you know whether he is really saved? If he decides against you and God, the responsibility for his choice is his, not yours.

Obviously, the choice to let your spouse leave permanently should not be made without extensive Christian counseling. Make sure that you don't abuse your boundaries in a selfish way to drive your spouse away from you, so that you can feel as the innocent victim of a spouse who doesn't want to live with you. Instead make every effort to live in peace with your spouse and to be holy **(Hebrews 12:14)**. Remember that God does not leave you even during the darkest times. Cling to him and your friends as you establish good limits for you and your marriage.

By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me. Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my savior and my God. ***(Psalm 42:8a,11b)***

Developing healthy Boundaries

Boundary development proceeds in stages. As we grow in our boundary development, we see progress in our spiritual life and in the quality of our relationships. But there is also the risk that in our attempts to develop solid boundaries we fall from one extreme into another and actually misuse the idea of boundaries. The final two chapters will help us evaluating our progress in developing healthy boundaries and avoiding their misuse.

Measuring Success with Boundaries

In all the previous chapters we have talked about the importance of boundaries for personal growth, resolving conflicts, and increasing love in our relationships. We have looked at a variety of situations and suggested practical ways for establishing appropriate boundaries. However, the path from a life without boundaries to one where our boundaries are mature is neither short nor easy, as it requires fundamental adjustments to our way of thinking and our attitude towards God, ourselves, and other people. Most of all, we have to flesh out the general guidelines presented here and to apply them to our specific situation.

Some people get discouraged on the way, as it takes them much longer than they expected. They see no progress and begin to believe that boundaries don't work after all, because real life is different from what is described here. Or they believe that boundaries are a good thing in principle but that they are just not capable of establishing them.

For those people there is hope. Success with boundaries is not an issue of yes or no, but a continuous change in our life. It is possible to measure these changes and to see which step you have already gone and which steps are still ahead of you. The following eleven stages will help you determine where you are in the development and to guide the next step in your growth.

Anger - our early-warning signal when boundaries are violated

The first sign that you are beginning to develop boundaries is usually a sense of resentment, frustration, and even anger at the violations in your life. You didn't notice it before, but people are overstepping your boundaries and now your anger alerts you of these things.

Some Christians, being afraid that anger is sin or could damage their relationship to other people, have buried this anger so deeply inside themselves that they don't feel it anymore. But people who cannot get angry at all when they are being manipulated, controlled, or violated in other ways have a severe handicap. Like a person infected with leprosy, they lack the early warning signals that usually tell them that something is severely wrong. They don't feel the pain, so they don't notice that some damage is done to them until the damage is so big that they can't overlook it anymore. Anger is a natural thing - even the Lord became angry **(Exodus 4:14, Numbers 32:13, Deuteronomy 29:27)**. Anger flares up like a fire inside you, letting you know that there is a problem that needs to be confronted.

As you learn to look truthfully at what happens around you, you may discover this anger for the first time. This is a good sign - don't be afraid of it. Give yourself permission to feel angry when you are being controlled by others. That doesn't mean you should lash out in anger **(Ephesians 4:26)**, but you should welcome these unpleasant feelings as a friend - an early-warning signal that finally is working.

If you realize that you even don't allow yourself to be angry, now is a good time to start. Work on finding a safe place to tell the truth, even unpleasant ones. As you learn to become more honest about differences and disagreements, you will become able to allow your anger help you.

A change of preferences - boundary lovers become more attractive

People with immature limit-setting abilities usually find themselves involved with ``boundary busters''. These may be family members, colleagues, friends, church members, and even spouses who regularly overstep their boundaries - because they let them do so. The boundary confusion seems normal to them, since they don't know better and are not really aware of the destruction it causes for them.

As you begin developing your own boundaries, however, you feel more attracted to people who can hear your no without giving you a hard time. They don't take it personal and are not hurt by your no. They do not try to make you feel guilty about it. They simply say: ``OK, we'll miss you, but we see you next time''. Formerly, you didn't appreciate them, because that answer seemed so cold to you. But now you grow to like them, because you realize that they are so much easier to deal with - they care enough for you to accept your freedom and allow you to make your own choices without exercising pressure.

The reason for this shift is that we were created by God to be free. Free to love, free to be close to God and to others **(2. Corinthians 3:17, Galatians 5:1, Colossians 3:14)**. And when we find relationships that allow us to be free to set our own limits, something wonderful happens. We find the freedom to say a wholehearted, unconflicted, gratitude-driven yes to others. They enable us to become honest, authentic, and loving individuals and that makes their companionship very refreshing.

Boundaries cannot develop in a vacuum. We need deep relationships with boundary lovers and to receive their support and understanding. Through them, God gives us the grace and power to begin the hard work of limit setting.

If you find honest people with clear boundaries somewhat harsh and cold and still feel drawn to people who enmesh you with their own feelings, if you still find these people more caring or interesting, think again. They may make you feel a part of the family, but they don't allow you to be who you really are. They make you say yes to things that you don't really want. You will find yourself constantly under pressure to please them and are always afraid to lose their love if you don't. In other words, they effectively prevent your personal and spiritual growth and you will lack the joy that the freedom in Christ brings.

Identify some honest, boundary loving people and try to get to know them better. You will see how refreshing it can be to be around them, because they make you experience a freedom that you never knew before.

Developing close connections to people with clear boundaries

The next step that usually follows our increasing preference for boundary lovers is that we begin developing close and meaningful relationships with them - either by

setting clearer boundaries in our current relationships or by finding new attachments in which to invest.

This phase is crucial for our future growth, since boundaries - like any other spiritual discipline - cannot be developed in a vacuum. We need others who pursue the same values as we do to encourage us, practice with us, and hold us accountable.

*... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ **(John 1:17b)**.*

Jesus promised us that he would be right in our midst whenever we have fellowship with other Christians in His name **(Matthew 18:20)**. The presence of His spirit together with the support of those who believe in us provides a spiritual and emotional home for us. No matter how severe the rejection of the person we're in conflict in, we are never alone and without love. And that makes all the difference in the world, when it comes to building and keeping firm boundaries.

We mentioned this over and over again: as long as you don't develop close friendships with boundary-loving people, you will have a hard time dealing with conflicts, particularly when the conflict is between you and your spouse. It is never too late to start such a friendship. You just have to allow other people to get to know you as you really are - step by step.

A change in our value system

After you have begun developing friendships with more clearly defined people, you will notice that your value system begins to change. You will realize that taking responsibility for yourself is healthy, while taking responsibility for other people's problems is destructive both for them and for you.

We learn what it means to love, because we are loved by God and other people **(1. John 4:19)**. Grace coming from the outside makes us able to develop it inside as well, since our basic sense of ourselves - what we believe to be real and true - is influenced by our significant relationships. That is why so many people experienced no love in their childhood years seem not to be able to shake off a deep sense of being worthless and unloveable. But when Christians begin to value developing themselves into the image of God, a shift occurs. They realize that they are wonderfully made by God **(Psalm 139:14)** and that taking care of the talents God had given them is very important**(Matthew 25:14-30)**. As a result, healing can take place.

This adjustment in your values is another crucial step on your way towards developing healthy boundaries. Some people become afraid when they notice the change that is going on. They fear becoming selfish and turn back, not realizing how important it is for them to learn self-protection and biblical boundaries.

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is a wellspring of life **(Proverbs 4:23)**.*

Are you watching over your heart? Unless you value the treasures that God has given you - time, money, feelings, beliefs, etc. - and want to keep them protected, you can't guard your heart. How do you want others to treat these treasures? How do you want others not to treat them? Answer these questions truthfully in the light of Proverbs 4:23 and you will notice that a change is going on that will be beneficial for your spiritual and emotional growth.

Practicing boundaries in a safe environment

Once you are in the company of safe and boundary loving people and notice that you begin to value clearly defined responsibilities, it is time to practice setting limits where they are needed. This may not be easy for people who have never before dared to tell the truth and set limits to other people.

It is wise to start setting limits in a safe environment instead of beginning with the difficult people right away. After all, you have little experience in dealing with the negative reaction that the latter may give you and you have to overcome a lot of inner doubts and insecurities. You will notice that it is much easier to set limits with people who have expressed their unconditional love and acceptance to you and respond positively to your first attempts.

Even if you're tempted to do so, don't skip this important training step. Ask friends or a support group if you could work on boundaries with them. Learn to confront them about issues where you disagree or feel stepped upon. You may be surprised to see that they actually welcome what you do instead of resisting you, because they know that true intimacy is only built around the freedom to disagree.

He who conceals his hatred has lying lips ***(Proverbs 10:18)***

Welcoming guilty feelings as sign of growth

As you begin becoming more truthful about what is and what is not your responsibility, you will experience a sense of self-condemnation. You feel guilty about what you have done, because you have transgressed some inner rules that were formerly very important to you.

Why is that?

So far you have seldomly based your decisions on your own values but on the desire to please the people around you. Even when you are surrounded by supportive boundary lovers, your conscience will not really allow you to set limits against other people. The reason for that your conscience, which is supposed to help you distinguishing right from wrong, has become an unbiblically harsh internal judge. Your weak conscience condemns you for imagined transgressions that biblically are no transgressions at all.

Welcome these guilty feelings, because activating the hostile conscience is a sign for spiritual growth. If you don't hear the inner protest, chances are that you are not doing anything different from before - that is that you're not moving ahead. Listen to these internal guilt messages but don't give in to them. Instead, compare them with the word of God. If they point to actual sin, you should repent and ask for forgiveness. But if your inner judge condemns you for breaking human traditions or self-imposed restraints, rejoice and go on, because you are on your way towards overcoming limitations that God never wanted you to have.

Practicing boundaries with ``difficult'' people

Now that you have done most of your homework it is time to go out and confront the real problems. Who is the person with whom it is most difficult for you to set limits? What relationships do you experience as complicated, conflict-laden, and sometimes even frightening. Straightening out these relationships is a major goal in becoming a truthful and mature person.

Make sure that you have practiced boundary setting before you attempt this step, because the ultimate target is not fixing your spouse or telling your parents no. The real goal of learning boundaries is maturity and becoming more Christ-like **(1. John 3:2)**, able to give and receive love. The goal is to develop a character structure that can set limits on yourself and others at appropriate times. We can't love without boundaries and we can't work productively without boundaries, since without boundaries our love and our work will be driven by compliance or guilt.

As you develop an honest, goal-oriented character, you will become able of confronting those who really give you a hard time in a firm but loving way. Sometimes, your no will result in the other party being angry or hurt. Don't be afraid of that - what you see is a division in the relationship that has existed before but was never openly addressed. Boundaries simply bring these conflicts and disagreements to the surface and enable you to deal with them.

Prayerfully prepare these confrontations. Make a list of your significant relationships and of the specific treasures that are violated in them. Ask yourself what specific boundaries need to be set to protect these treasures. Think about appropriate forms of confrontation and talk with a friend about the steps you have to take. And then go these steps, knowing that God is with you.

Guilty feelings disappear

As you learn to establish appropriate boundaries within both safe and difficult relationships you will notice that the guilty feelings about setting limits begin to diminish. This is a good sign. Your conscience has adjusted spiritually and emotionally to God's truth. Instead of being influenced by human traditions, the desire to please others, and an overly critical internal judge, you now respond to biblical values: truth, love, responsibility, and forgiveness. Your heart has found somewhere else to go for self-evaluation besides a critical conscience. You become able to *keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience* **(1. Timothy 3:9)**.

If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ ***(Galatians 1:10b)***.

Rejoice! Your practicing is beginning to pay off. You are now capable of being truthful to others without feeling bad about it - even if you have to express unpleasant truths. And the absence of guilty feelings will make you able to speak the truth in a kind and loving way.

Desiring others to have boundaries as well

All the stages so far had to do with growing in your own ability to *establish* boundaries. This, of course is only one half of what boundaries are about. Once you have learned to treasure freedom and responsibility, you will also learn to respect the boundaries that others have to set with you. There are several reasons why this is happening.

You are now seeing the benefits of other people's boundaries for your own personal growth. They confront your own self-centeredness and help you become more God- and other-centered. Loving the boundaries of others helps you overcome a part of your fallen nature.

Loving other people's boundaries also increases your capacity to care about others. You already know how encouraging it was for you to be loved and accepted by others as you are. Now you become ready to do the same - to love not only the agreeable aspects of others but also their resistance, confrontation, and separateness. You now rejoice about the growth of others, even if that means that you will not get what *you* want. You are getting closer to loving your neighbor as yourself **(Galatians 5:14)**.

Parents may be able to understand this step more easily. You do not want your children to remain two-year olds, but you want them to grow. You want them to become mature personalities, capable of making their own choices wisely, so that they will be able to survive on their own when they finally leave you. You rejoice when you see them become independent - even if that involves becoming independent of you as well.

Free to say no instead of a half-hearted yes

There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said: ``Son, go and work today in the vineyard''. ``I will not'', he answered, but later changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ``I will, Sir'', but did not go. Which of the two did what is father wanted? ***(Matthew 21:28-31)***

As you grow into a more responsible person, you will notice that you also grow in your ability to deal with situations where you are unsure how to respond.

People with undeveloped limit-setting abilities tend to say yes when they are being asked to do something, even if they are not sure whether they can actually live up to their promise. They do so out of a desire to please the other and to avoid conflict. Later, however, they regret their promise and either resentfully fulfill it or find excuses why they couldn't keep it. Either way, their premature yes has damaged their relationship with the people to whom they have made the promise.

Mature people consider the costs of their endeavors, before they commit to them **(Luke 14:28-30)**. They are careful not to promise what they cannot deliver. If they are unsure, they say no instead of yes. They can still change their minds when they find the resources to do what they had been asked. As a consequence, they become free to keep the promises they make with a cheerful heart **(2. Corinthians 9:7)**. They are driven by biblical values instead of outside pressure and over the time others will value them as reliable and responsible. The freedom to say no makes their yes more valuable.

If you still find yourself in the situations where you find it costly, painful, or inconvenient to keep a promise you made, don't resort to lame excuses why you ``cannot'' do what you promised.[6]Instead, stop making promises you cannot keep. Calculate the costs and then let your yes be yes and your no be no **(Matthew 5:37)**.

Value-driven goal setting

You have reached the final stage of your boundary development when you realize that you have a direction in your life. Values like love of God, love of your spouse, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, faithfulness, and holiness (Chapter 8) begin to be the driving force in your life. You plan ahead and steadily move towards your personal goals. And you help your spouse to do the same.

You are now reaping the fruit of years of work. Formerly you may have been controlling and impulsive, or compliant and nonconfrontative. Now you have developed a sense of responsibility and have become more honest. You spend time together with your spouse to review the last month or year and to plan for the next one. Like the apostle Paul, you can look back without regret

I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith
(2. Timothy 4:7)

But isn't that an illusion? Can we ever reach such a state? Doesn't life always bring trials, complications, and people who try to force me onto their track instead of God's?

Of course it will. Having mature boundaries doesn't mean that your life will be without difficulties and people resisting your boundaries and goals. But mature people make room for that. They don't assume that everything always goes smoothly. They

make realistic plans instead of setting overly optimistic goals. They are prepared to deal with people who resist them in a loving but firm way. And most of all, they let the Holy Spirit guide them in all their plans and actions.

So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their sinful nature with its passion and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ***(Galatians 5:16, 22-25)***

Avoiding the Misuse of Boundaries

Establishing appropriate boundaries, as we have seen, is essential for developing a healthy, balanced lifestyle, for spiritual growth, and for our ability to give and receive love. In a marriage relationship, they are the key to resolving conflicts and to rebuild a marriage that has been burdened by problems that have not been addressed for years.

Sadly enough however, the idea of establishing boundaries has also been misunderstood and misused.

%3. A compliant wife divorces her husband as her first and only boundary.
%3. A husband attempts to control his wife by what he calls ``setting boundaries''
%3. A wife uses withdrawal and consequences to punish her husband for misbehavior.
%3. A husband declares his rage attacks as ``simply being truthful''
%3. A married son neglects his needy parents and uses **Genesis 2:24** as excuse.

There are many more ways in which boundaries have been misused to justify steps that God never intended to be taken. People often go from one extreme to the other. A compliant person finally learns how to say no - but becomes selfish and irresponsible. An irresponsible person finally begins disciplining himself, but becomes legalistic and intolerant in the process. These are grievous misunderstandings of what the Bible teaches about becoming a righteous, responsible, and free person with good boundaries. And usually they result in increased alienation instead of increased love.

This is not what boundaries are supposed to be about. They are not designed to end relationships but to preserve and deepen them. They should be used for the benefit of

a marriage, not as a means to exclude others, an excuse for selfishness or self-righteousness, or as a means for fixing, punishing, or controlling others.

In this chapter we want to clarify some of the most common misconceptions about boundaries, particularly at boundaries in marriage. We will look at the true purpose of suffering and why boundaries are not a means to quickly escape suffering. We will discuss the distinction between setting limits and ultimatums and the proper use of boundaries in conflict solving. We will take a close look at a proper understanding of submission and finally revisit the misconceptions about divorce and separation as a means to solve difficult marriage conflicts.

All these discussions shall help us to use boundaries in a way that makes the relationship to our spouse grow stronger and deeper. However, we have to keep in mind that there are no simple recipes for establishing proper boundaries. There can only be general guidelines from the Word of God that we need to interpret in the specific situation that we are dealing with. God has give us a brain to think **(James 1:5)** and the Holy Spirit as a helper **(John 14:26)** - we need to use both if we want to succeed, even if that means a lot of (mental) work for us.[7]

Boundaries are not a quick escape from suffering or responsibility

Some people have the idea that setting boundaries is a means to end suffering in their life. A compliant wife may one day decide that she has given in to her husband's demands long enough and that now it is her turn to do things as she wants. So she starts doing things without checking with her husband, spends money as she sees fit, leaves for the evening without telling him in advance, and explains all this as finally setting boundaries. After all, she is a grown adult and doesn't have to answer to somebody else for her actions.

What is wrong here?

While a compliant person does indeed have to learn to say no, that doesn't mean she can now begin to do what she wants. Freedom from control is not a license for selfishness. Independence doesn't mean the end of our responsibility to other people, particularly your spouse. Setting boundaries does not aim at making life *easier* and more comfortable, but at making it *better* and deeper connected to our spouse. In other words, boundaries are not a quick escape from suffering, but aim at a more meaningful relationship between us and out spouse - even if that means a temporary increase in suffering.

In fact, suffering is a necessary part of life, growth, and close relationships. It is an important component of the procedure that helps us develop character and become more mature.

*... we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope **(Romans 5:3-4)**. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must*

finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ***(James 1:2-4)***

Suffering, if we deal with it in the right way, can help us adapt to reality. We will realize our limitations, give up the wish to be God ourselves, learn to give to others, and learn to let God (and others) fill our true needs, while giving up truly selfish desires. All this helps us become more complete, grow in our faith, strengthen our relationship to our spouses. Here are a few examples of how a marriage can benefit from the results of (Godly) suffering.

%3. We *grow in our faith* that God helps and supports us where we reach our limits.
%3. We learn to *hold on to our values* in difficult times (when we most need them).
%3. We *become a truthful person* even if that what we have to say is not popular.
%3. We *delay gratification* and save for a future and better goal **(Matthew 6:19-21)**.
%3. We stay connected to others even when we feel the urge to withdraw.
%3. We learn to *live in forgiveness* with an imperfect spouse.
%3. We learn to *accept forgiveness*, as we are imperfect ourselves.

All these character values are the result of our willingness to accept suffering for a higher goal. Almost all of the processes that strengthen and deepen our marriage will involve some form of pain and discomfort. If avoiding suffering has a priority for us (recall our discussion in Chapter 8.1), then will stay away from the learning curve of adulthood and miss much of the progress that God has intended for us.

Now there is, of course, a lot of suffering in our lives that God never intended for us to endure. This kind of suffering, however, has little to do with the suffering that leads to growth. Ungodly suffering, as we may call it, is the result of ungodly behavior - that is either doing the wrong thing or not doing the right thing. For instance, when the bible tells us

In your anger do not sin: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry ***(Ephesians 4:26)***.

and we do not resolve the issue that makes us angry before we go to sleep, then wo should not be surprised if we can't sleep or wake up the next morning with a bad

feeling. We haven't been doing the right thing and suffer the consequences. Similar, when **Proverbs 19:19** tells us

A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.

and we enable our spouse's immaturity instead of confronting it, we will realize that we have to suffer our spouse's rage over and over again. We have done the wrong thing and the consequences we reap are painful for us.

Either way, the suffering we have to endure in these situations is nothing we have the right to complain about. We caused it and we are the only ones who can resolve it by changing *our* behavior.

Godly suffering is something different. As an athlete suffers while he undergoes the difficult training for a competition, so we suffer as we mature. For instance, if a compliant spouse speaks up and tells the truth instead of remaining silent, she experiences that this is difficult for her. After a while, truthfulness becomes easier, but then she has to take the next step: realizing that she also has a judgmental, condemning spirit. Working on forgiveness to resolve this problem again means godly suffering. The process continues while she grows more and more.

The difference is that godly suffering changes as we mature and become more sensitive for the ``tiny'' sins in our life and always makes us look forward to the next goal that we accomplish.

... he who has suffered in his body is done with sin ***(1. Peter 4:1b)***

Ungodly suffering, on the other hand, repeats itself over and over again and leads to a miserable situation without hope, unless we really change *our* behavior. God wants us to end this form of suffering, since it produces no growth. Here are a few examples of how setting appropriate boundaries can help replacing ungodly suffering by one that leads to a strengthened relationship between you and your spouse.

%3. If your husband constantly criticizes everything you do, you may want to stop complying to win his approval, since you won't succeed anyway. Instead, you may tell him that you don't want to hear this form of unjust criticism anymore and leave the room.
The difference? You're being honest about how you experience his behavior instead of letting him believe that he is right in every criticism he utters. That

may be difficult and it may create an angry reaction. But it is a chance for resolving the issue as prescribed in **Matthew 18:15**.

%3. If your wife continuously overspends, you should not continue to nag or be silent about it. It doesn't change her behavior and you will always be forced to deal with financial problems that you didn't cause. Instead, you may have to come up with creative ideas to make her stay within the agreed limits, for instance by reducing the limit on joint credit cards or - if it is really bad - canceling joint credit cards and letting her deal with the banks herself.
%3. If your husband doesn't want to help at home although both of you have jobs, stop pretending that this is OK with you and overlook it. Let him cook his own meals occasionally until he gets the message.
%3. If your wife tries to control you by guilt messages, don't continue to do what she wants if you really resent it. It only makes you angry at her and drives a wedge between the two of you. Instead, you may have to openly confront her covert control, even if she increases her guilt messages by calling you an unloving person.

None of these scenarios offers you a chance for a painless response. The only choice you have is whether you want to suffer a situation that will not change or whether you want at least some good long-term results if you have to suffer anyway, even if the discomfort is temporarily greater than in the other case. Boundaries aim at the latter. They don't stop the suffering, but they help you build love, honesty and freedom in your relationship.

Boundaries are more than simple limits and ultimatums

People who have a hard time setting boundaries sometimes jump from compliance to extremely rigid limits. Instead of confronting the issue lovingly, they go from silence about it to an ultimatum: *I have endured this for years. Now I have enough of all this. You either change right now or else ....* And usually the consequence they announce is rather drastic.

Unfortunately, such an approach usually backfires severely instead of bringing about the solution they desire, as it makes the two of you adversaries instead of partners in resolving a conflict. If you don't give your spouse a chance to understand the problem that you have with him but confront him with threats right away, he will only sense your anger, but not that you have a genuine interest in resolving the issue. How would you react, if your spouse would set an ultimatum before you the first time he talks about a weakness of yours? The purpose of showing him his fault is not to knock it over him, but to win him back **(Matthew 18:15)**.

Establishing appropriate boundaries is much more than just setting limits. It is a part of a spiritual and emotional growth process that shall bring the two of you closer together - instead of driving you apart. God himself deals with us the same way. Although he would have the right to put an ultimatum before us to make us leave our sinful ways, he takes a different route.

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. ***(Isaiah 1:18-20)***

God clearly states his limits - he will not tolerate our sin. However he couples this with a lot of other ingredients: reason, a promise, a warning, and a choice.

Do the same in your marriage. Growth is difficult for your spouse, especially when she is in denial or out of control. Although you have to establish firm limits, you also need to give her the same grace that you wish to receive when you need to work on your character **(Matthew 7:12)**. Limits should never come alone but should be accompanied by the following elements.

Love
is the key ingredient of any relationship. When you love someone, everything you do is *for* him, and nothing you do or say comes from a vengeful or punishing perspective. Before you establish limits, you need to make your spouse understand that you desire the best for him.
The limits you have to set may be painful, but your love balances the pain and replaces the fear, that may be triggered by your limits, with the hope that what you do is for the best of your relationship **(1. John 4:17-18, 1. Timothy 1:5, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)**.
Not all spouses respond openly to the love you show them. But be assured that your love reaches their soul even if they don't show it.
Other people:
We talked about this over and over again. Everyone needs to have friends in addition to his or her spouse **(Proverbs 17:17, 18:24, 27:6, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)**, particularly in times of relationship conflicts. If you don't have supportive relationships to other people, chances are that you will set no boundaries at all or that you will set extremely harsh ones as a response to your lack of feeling loved. Either way, you will not get what you want.
Ownership:
In a marriage, no relationship problem is only the fault of one partner. This may be hard to believe when you see yourself as the innocent victim of an irresponsible spouse. But whatever the problem is, you will discover that you have contributed to it as well - even if your share is only a tenth of a percent. Perhaps you have not spoken up when you should have. Perhaps you have told others about your problem but have never gone directly to your spouse with it.
Take the plank out of your eye **(Matthew 7:3-5)**! Humbly take responsibility for what you have done or failed to do, apologize (honestly), ask for forgiveness, and change. If you own your part of the problem, your spouse will not feel judged and put down by you and will be more likely to accept your boundaries.
Invitation:
The first step in confronting your spouse should never be a limit, but always an invitation to change. Bring up the issue, clearly and specifically. Let him know how his actions affect you and that you want him to change because you want to be closer

to him. Maybe he did not realize that he always has a critical tone that hurts your feelings. Your loving request gives him a chance to empathize with your feelings and to repent.
Of course, a request to change will not always find a positive response. But if you don't even try, you miss a great chance to resolve an issue peacefully.

Warning:

One of the biggest mistakes that you can make when establishing boundaries is not giving appropriate warning. If you just set limits out of the blue, your spouse will feel ambushed and rightfully become angry at you.
A warning, on the other hand, gives him a choice. Something painful may happen in the future, but his behavior will help determine what happens. That is the way God deals with us **(Ezekiel 3:18-19, Deuteronomy 30:15-20)**. Knowing what consequences the future may bring helps us take ownership of ourselves.

Patience:

A warning, if not accompanied with patience, is an ultimatum. Sometimes, you may have a difficult time accepting your mate's irresponsible or controlling behavior. You want to see it changed ... and you want this *now*.
You may not be so lucky. Only few people in the world are capable of changing immediately when they see their error. Your spouse may not be one of them - even if you are. Don't be critical when she fails or even resists the growth process. Be patient, she may need time to adjust to the new reality.
However, that doesn't mean you should be ignoring the lack of progress either. Silent suffering is not the same as patience but only an attempt to avoid conflict. Patience means providing the ingredients for growth while allowing your spouse time to respond. This is how God deals with you - he allows you to grow at a slow pace, but he provides all the help you need.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone come to repentance. ***(2. Peter 3:9)***

Consequences:

When all the above ingredients are in play and your spouse still doesn't change her ways, you may have to follow through with your consequences. Keep in mind however, that consequences have nothing to do with anger, revenge, or punishment. They are there to protect you and to help your spouse deal with the reality of her actions. Be loving, but be consistent too. Otherwise all you have done is nagging and letting your spouse have her way anyway.

Renegotiation:

Boundaries don't have to remain the same forever. They can be changed and even dropped altogether as your spouse matures over time. As you and your spouse grow, you will have less of a need to protect yourself and will be able to be closer to her. Renegotiate the rules that you have set in the past: the fewer you need, the better it will be for your relationship.

Forgiveness:

Finally, make sure that constantly live in a process of forgiveness - you cancel and forget the sins of the past **(Hebrews 8:12)**. You need both - forgive your spouse and request his forgiveness. If you don't live in forgiveness, all you try to accomplish by setting boundaries can be severely hampered by blaming, judging, laying guilt trips on

him, or being unable to let go of the past. Don't give these attitudes a chance to grow - practice forgiveness day by day.

None of the above steps are easy. If they were, we would all do them automatically. As mentioned before, growth involves suffering. But this form of suffering gives us hope, while the alternative - a constantly deteriorating marriage - is much worse.

Understanding submission

A large number of Christian women fear that establishing boundaries is a sign of rebellion and unsubmissiveness. They believe that submission means doing whatever their husband wants from them and that saying no to their spouse is the greatest sin they can commit. Sadly enough, the issue of submission is one of the most misused teachings of the Bible.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the savior.
(Ephesians 5:22-23)

For centuries, husbands have used the apostle Paul's writings to justify control and abuse of their wives. They confuse ``head'' with ``unquestionable authority'' and the ``helper'' from **Genesis 2:18** with an inferior being that has no value in itself and needs to be under the control of a man. After all, they reason, men came first **(1. Timothy 2:13)**, women are the weaker part of a marriage **(1. Peter 3:7)** and the ones who can be deceived so easily **(1. Timothy 2:14)**.

Nothing could be more wrong and taken out of context. In a Christian marriage a husband should never quote these passages to his wife to tell her what she is supposed to do. Actually, the only husbands who see the need to bring up the issue of submission are the ones who want to control their wives and to break down any attempt to confront issues that require them to change. Submission cannot be enforced - it has to be earned.

What then does the Bible really teach about submission and the roles of husband and wife in the family?

Basically, by comparing the marriage relationship to the relation between Christ and the church, the Bible establishes a sense of order in a marriage. Without order, there would be chaos in the family. Someone has to be the leader, the one who takes the final responsibility for the family. The Bible assigns that role to the husband and asks the wife to submit to her husband's leadership, since otherwise his task would be impossible.

But what does leadership mean? Certainly not being the boss who can order others around as he sees fit, the one who is being served by everybody else, or the final authority who's opinion is the only thing that counts. The model that the Bible gives us is quite different.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. ***(Ephesians 5:25)***

A husband's leadership in the family should be Christ-like. As Christ gave himself up for his church, so should the husband sacrifice himself for his wife. He should look out for her growth, give direction and inspiration, help her become holy, provide the resources she needs, protect her from the world around her, heal her hurts, take her suffering upon himself, support her in trials, and help her up when she falls.

In other words, the attitude of the husband should be that of a giving servant **(Philippians 2:5-8)**, who is committed to the best for those he is leading. That is not an easy task, and a wife who resists a husband who is loving, protective, truthful, and providing for her well-being makes it very difficult for him to live up to the role that God has assigned to him. That is why the Bible asks her to submit to him, to respect him, to encourage him, to help him, and to be a loving companion for him.

Marriage works best if both partners are equal but have different roles. Decisions are made mutually, with both partners bringing in their different perspective and a desire to chose the optimal solution for whatever needs to be done. He needs her input and she needs his - they are interdependent, both willing to submit to the other's needs, knowing that the other one does the same.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. ***(Ephesians 5:21)***

A problem occurs if either of the two neglects the role that God has given to them. If a husband is passive and lets his wife take over, then this is not an expression of love for her, but simply a way to make life easy for himself - he doesn't take care of her true needs. If he dominates his wife, he does not give himself up for her but follows his selfish desires. Worst of all, if he calls her ``unsubmissive'' when she confronts him about some ungodly behavior, then he puts himself above God - telling her that submission to him is more important that submission to God. But

Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God ***(Acts 4:19)***.

There is also a problem when a woman refuses to submit and wants to be be in charge of everything. This, too, is a sign of selfishness and clearly violates God's role model for the family. In a marriage relationship you can't always have it your way. And if you try to control your spouse, you are damaging the loving relationship between the two of you. Even if he doesn't live up to his role, you should help him and encourage him to do what he needs to do, but not take over yourself. And if he does try to lead you in a loving, protective, and truthful way, don't resist him.

Submission only has meaning in the context of free and mature adults. A wife who is not free to say no to her husband cannot submit. She is subject to a slave driver and out of the will of God.

It is for freedom that Christ has set you free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourself be burdened again by a yoke of slavery ***(Galatians 5:1)***.

Boundaries promote and protect the freedom that God wants you to have. They do not contrast the idea of submission, but they are the key ingredient to make submission possible. Only a free person is able to submit.

While the biblical teaching of submission gives a clear role model for the family, each couple has to work out what this means for their specific situation. The Bible does not give you a fixed set of rules how you should organize your family in detail and how you should divide responsibilities. But it gives you plenty of guidelines that you should take into consideration as you weigh the different options.

Why separation and divorce doesn't solve conflicts

Many people in today's society believe that a marriage easily gets to the point where divorce is the only option that is left. We all know that divorce rates in this country are stunning and that Christian marriages don't seem to do better than any other marriage. The story that you hear about marriages that have fallen apart is almost always the same.

When the young lady first met her future husband, she was so excited. He was all she ever wanted. Everything was so wonderful and their dating time was heaven on earth. She could not wait to hear him propose and of course she said yes, when he did.
Like many couples, they didn't take the time to get to know each other better and married way too early. They were sure that their love would overcome everything that might come into their way. But this feeling lasted only for a few months - until they discovered the other sides in their partner's personality.
Somehow the warm feeling between them began to cool off. They paid less attention to each other, became more picky, spent more time with other people and other things. And each of them had the feeling that it was the other one who had changed to the worse.

As so often, it was the wife who became more discouraged and demanded a change. She tried nagging, but that only made him angry. She tried the ``nice wife'' approach, blaming herself for his unresponsiveness. She asked him to go to counseling, but he didn't believe in talking to other people about problems. Nothing seemed to work. Finally she confided in a friend, who told her to have some boundaries, since God never intended her to live like this. That seemed convincing, so she took her friends advice and told her husband that he had to change or else. When he refused to give in to her ultimatum, she went to see an attorney and filed for divorce. Finally she was free again.

Hardly anybody has never heard of a marriage that went down that way. In fact, even our own marriage relationships have gone down that path up to a certain degree. Discovering the dark side in our spouse's personality is part of what intimacy is about. We are one of the few people who ever get to see that - and of course we are disappointed to see that our ideal partner is not so ideal after all.

But does it *have* to end like that? Is divorce really unavoidable once a marriage has reached a certain point? Does setting boundaries have to mean separation if the situation becomes unbearable for one spouse? We already talked about this issue (see Section 11.5.4) and the answer is clearly *no*! For God, divorce is not an option, and it should not be one for you either.

I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel ***(Malachi 2:16)****.*

Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate ***(Matthew 19:6)****.*

A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife ***(1. Corinthians 7:10-11)****.*

Does that mean that God wants us to quietly endure a bad marriage? Does that mean that the friend who tells us to have some boundaries is wrong? No it doesn't! We certainly need some boundaries if our marriage goes bad. And our friend is right - God never intended us to live like that. But what usually is wrong is the way we chose to solve the problem.

Divorce does not fix the problems of a marriage. It simply ends the relationship. It is a killer boundary that takes away any chance to resolve a problem. Don't even think about it! And never ever threaten that you might separate from your spouse if he doesn't change. That takes away every basis for rekindling the love between the two of you. His reaction will either be anger and rebellion, in which case you have to follow through with your threat, or fear and compliance, in which case his love for you is gone **(1. John 4:18b)**. Nothing good has ever come out of that.

What then is God's solution for your an unbearable situation? His answer may be: *You can't live that way anymore? Good that you finally realized that! Don't live that way anymore - begin setting limits that are designed to promote change and redemption.*

They are more than overdue. We talked about how to do that over and over again. There are many alternatives to getting a divorce. Even if you believe you have tried everything possible to make your marriage work, there are still many Godly ways that you haven't tried yet. You may have to revisit Section 11 again, particularly the issue of resolving conflicts with a boundary-resistant spouse. God has always intended that we do everything we can do to redeem relationships instead of leaving them. And if we do things His way, there is a very good chance that we will succeed - even if that means a lot of temporary suffering.

People with real boundaries can avoid many divorces. They may have to take a strong stance, not participating in the behavioral patterns that burden their marriage, and demanding righteousness from their spouse. In the process they have to work on their own spiritual and emotional growth, so that they live in truth and can't be accused of being hypocritical.

Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God ***(John 3:21)***.

If you become the light, then your spouse either changes, if he lives in the light as well, or goes away, if God's commandments actually mean nothing to him (which will hardly ever be the case). If you are doing the right things, your spouse's reaction will tell you who he really is. If he decides to leave, you can't do much about it **(1. Corinthians 7:15-16)**. But at least you can rest in the assurance that you have done everything possible to redeem the relationship.

Most people whose marriages are deteriorating although they are setting boundaries, make the mistake that they do not work on their own growth as well. They leave the plank in their own eyes while they are trying to take the speck out of their spouse's eye. In reality, all they do is continuing to blame their spouse and demanding change without changing themselves. They don't live in the light, so the effect is not the same as we just described.

When establishing boundaries to repair a damaged relationship, we should keep the following steps in mind. They are similar to the ones already suggested in the section on dealing with boundary-resistant spouses.

%3. Develop *supportive relationships* with other people so that you have the strength to do the right thing when dealing with your spouse.
%3. Earn the right to require change by solving your own problems and *acting righteously* towards your spouse.
%3. *Use others* to intervene **(Matthew 18:16)**, such as pastors, counselors, friends or other people that your spouse may listen to.
%3. Accept reality and *forgive* what has happened in the past

%3. *Allow time* for your spouse to respond. After you have stopped enabling your spouse and have set appropriate boundaries, your spouse may need a while to adjust to the new reality.
%3. Observe, evaluate, and *follow through* - this is where the long suffering begins.
%3. *Adjust boundaries* and consequences as the situation changes. Relax them if your spouse genuinely repents **(2. Corinthians 2:5-8)**. Increase the severity of the consequence if the behavior of your spouse becomes worse **(Matthew 18:15-17)**.
%3. In severe cases, a *temporary separation* may be needed to protect you from significant harm. However, your goal should still be to redeem your marriage from a distance.

Boundaries in a marriage always seek to change and redeem a relationship. The boundaries you set should be for that purpose only, not for the purpose of ending the relationship. Take a stance against destructive behavior, but make sure that the problem you're addressing is really the other person's and that you have followed all of God' steps discussed in this book. End your ungodly suffering and see how the boundaries you set can be used to bring about redemption and reconciliation as well. Many ``hopeless'' situations can and have been resolved that way. Give it a chance.

Epilogue

When it comes to establishing and respecting boundaries, married couples can be very different.

There are those who want to grow in their marriage but had a ``bad start''. Like Adam and Eve, they used to point the finger at each other and get stuck. But they learn. They recognize the plank in their own eyes, remove it, take responsibility for their actions, and discover that their self-control leads to the deeper love that they had missed so far. For them, the journey of growth is not easy at all, but they travel the road willingly. If that is you, hold on to what you have, and you will see a tremendous amount of growth.

*Him, who overcomes, I will make a pillar in the temple of God **(Revelation 3:12a)**.*

Then there are the people, who have never taken a stand against hurt or evil in their marriage. They have been too afraid or too guilty to confront behavior that destroys love. And as a result, the hurt has increased more and more. Then they discover that God stands up for love and against evil, for freedom and responsibility and against domination an control. And they join God, begin to set boundaries, and as a result

their spouses begin to change as well. Because they were brave enough to take a stance to protect what they value, their marriage is turned around and saved. If that is your situation or the result that you hope for, take courage and *be not afraid of what you are to suffer*.

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ***(Revelation 2:10)***.

Then there are those, who have done the right thing, taken a stand for the good, but have been rejected by their spouse. They have suffered for their stand, but the outcome was only partially good. They have gained freedom from evil, but their spouses have turned against them, and the love they desired to find in their marriage has eluded them. They have to find love and support from their friends and their church. If that is what happened to you, my heart goes out to you. You have done well. May God bless you for your courage and perseverance.

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good. But even if you suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ***(1. Peter 3:13-14a)***

And then there are those people who need to be warned. They are the people who misuse boundaries to seek control, but continue to live in denial and blame themselves. They refuse to take the plank out of their eye, but try to blame and judge others. Make sure that you do not fall into this group. Before looking at the flaws of others, look at yourself first, and guard against using your freedom in Christ for your won selfish purposes **(Galatians 5:13)**.

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you. ***(Revelation 3:1b-3)***.

Whatever your situation is, learn to embrace boundaries in a Godly way. God always fights for love, often at his own expense, but never at the expense of another person. If you do likewise, your life will be blessed, and the chances are high that your marriage will experience growth and blessing as well.

Acknowledgments

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Footnotes

...[1]
Of course, we still should pray for each other, particularly for our spouses. But that doesn't mean we should take away from them what is theirs.
...[2]
This includes our exposure to television (e.g. soap operas), which presents an ungodly lifestyle as normal way of life.
...[3]
See also **Psalm 37:4** *Delight thyself also in the LORD: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart*
and **Psalm 21:2**: *Thou hast given him his heart's desire, and hast not withholden the request of his lips.*
...[4]
Psychology can be very helpful for detecting the roots of our problems. Psychologists have identified many common patterns in human behavior and are often in perfect agreement with biblical teachings. A Christian should not be afraid of taking advantage of these insights, but also be aware of the limitations of Psychology. It can be used to reveal problems and causes, but the solutions it offers are often in sharp contrast to the Bible: they help people to feel better and be more confident in their walk through life, but they do not address the real problem.
...[5]
Few things are more devastating to *all* parties than marital unfaithfulness. If an affair is tempting you, flee while you still can **(1.Corinthians 6:18)** and find a trusted friend to talk you back to your senses. You are close to destroying a lot of people and need to be rescued. See also **Proverbs 2:16-19, 5:3-20, 6:23-25**.
...[6]
Unfortunately, it has become a tradition to make promises like ``I'll call you'', ``I'll pray for you'', ``Stop by when you're in the area'', ``We should get together some day'', etc. that we do not really take serious. We just say it - we may even mean it at the time. But later we often don't live up to that promise or even forget that we have made it at all.

...[7]
Recently I heard a Bible College Professor state that about 90% of today's adults do really not think and thus do not actively control their lives anymore. They either let others do the thinking for them and do whatever they are being told (this is compliance), or do whatever goes through their mind without considering the consequences or what they do to others (this is irresponsibility). Even if this behavior creates a lot of suffering or problems for them they continue to do that because it is so much easier to just do as they always did than having to think through their actions thoroughly and then do what is right.

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