

Surviving the In-Law Problem



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In-laws. Every marriage has them. They are often the brunt of jokes. Often-times, however, those jokes are not too far from the truth.

Nonetheless, in-laws can be a great blessing to any marriage—but only if they are respectful of the parameters of their children’s marriage and the sovereignty of their family unit. The real in-law problems come when there are either no clear parameters to the parent-child relationships, or the existing parameters are violated.

First Things First: Leaving, Then Cleaving

The very first thing God’s Word says about marriage is that *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother...”* (Genesis 2:24, TNIV).

Before a man and woman can do any “cleaving” in marriage, there has to be some “leaving.” And that goes for both of them. For if either spouse is unwilling to reprioritize parents as less important than a husband or wife—in real terms—it will damage, if not destroy, their marriage.

In almost every case where I have counseled couples fighting over in-law problems, the resentment was much more focused on the spouse whose parents were intruding than on the in-laws, themselves.

It doesn’t take much to figure out that in-laws cannot violate a marriage without the help of a spouse. Consequently, if a problem with in-laws is not dealt with decisively, it can ruin the intimacy and trust of a marriage.

Many in-law problems end in a couple divorcing, because there is stress caused by the knowledge that someone outside the marriage is controlling it, and will most likely continue to do so.

According to God’s plan, when a couple gets married, they are to be-

come a sovereign and sacred union under Him. Control of the marriage by anyone outside of it is against God's design, and it damages the integrity of the relationship.

Sometimes, however, couples unknowingly invite "control" into their marriage by including parents in the process of their making decisions or addressing certain issues. Many of them say, "Oh, but we have a very close family."

In reality, what they're calling "closeness" is actually a violation of their marriage's boundary, and in most cases, the spouse whose in-laws cross that line will be the one to resent it. Even if he or she does not object, it is unhealthy for a couple to not have the proper amount of time alone, and to decide important issues between themselves.

One couple I knew spent almost every night, nearly every weekend and most vacations with the wife's parents. This went on for years. They all practically lived together, and no one seemed to mind. The facade remained intact until one day the husband had an affair. Eventually, they divorced.

Certainly, the husband's behavior could not be blamed on his wife, or his in-laws. Yet, it could be explained by a lack of emotional bonding in their marriage. They were not away from the in-laws long enough to be able to focus on each other, build intimacy and meet each other's needs.

In the end, what the couple touted as a close relationship with the wife's parents was actually an emotional prop to hide the faulty foundations of their weak marriage. They violated God's design, and they paid the ultimate price for doing so.

When in Doubt...Honor

Karen and I are blessed with great parents who are also great in-laws. We

have a close relationship with both sets of parents, without any negative issues. Being in-laws, ourselves, we relate to our children and their spouses in the same spirit as we do our parents—we are close with them and see them regularly, but we respect their need for “space.”

Personally, I believe in the old saying, “Good fences make good neighbors.” The point is simply that relationships succeed when there are clear, fair boundaries.

To help you understand what are appropriate boundaries concerning in-laws, and how to establish them in your marriage, there are four principles I want us to examine. I believe these principles will help you have the best possible relationship with your in-laws.

Principle 1: Honor

From the very beginning, God instructed us to honor our fathers and mothers (Exodus 20:12). Honoring our parents means we are to respect them privately and publicly, whether they are perfect or not. It also means we are to be careful about the attitudes we hold toward them.

Though we are told as adults to honor our parents, we are under no obligation to obey them. They hold no authority over us when we are grown. Children are the ones commanded to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1).

Yet, many children grow up, leave home, get married, but never realize their parents’ authority over them is no longer present.

To further complicate matters, adult children can often have a difficult time refusing their parents’ desires or directives due to their desire to please their parents, just as they did when they were growing up.

Whatever the case may be, the truth still stands that any time parents control their adult children, it harms the child’s marriage and demoralizes the child’s spouse.

As adult children, then, we must be willing to refuse *respectfully* the control of our parents. Still, if it comes down to parents trying to use money, shame, guilt, threats, or any other means to try to control us, our spouses or our children, we must stand up to them.

The challenge to standing up to our parents is to do it with love and respect. Certainly, it may be unpleasant, but it will cause them to respect us. More importantly, it will protect our marriage. Standing up to a parent can be one of the most difficult things we do in life, but we must do it when necessary. If we don't do it, no one will.

Refusing a parent's control is usually a defining moment that marks passage into adulthood. It means you have come to recognize who you are and your ability to stand on your own. If you lack a willingness to make that stand, then it means you have not developed your wings, or that you don't have the confidence to fly without your parents' permission.

Keep in mind, though, the longer you allow your parents to control you, the longer you will be robbed of the joys of maturity and "spreading your wings." And if you are married during that time, your parents' control over you will not only ground you, but also it will ground your marriage.

Now, if you or your spouse are in a situation where you work for your parents or in-laws, understand that their authority over you is only limited to your employment. If they try to expand their authority beyond the boundaries of employment into your personal life, you need to lovingly confront them. If that doesn't work, don't be employed by them.

Another situation to approach with caution is when your parents or in-laws give you money. On one hand that can be a blessing. On the other, it can often become a means of controlling you, your marriage or your children.

Certainly, an exception would be if you went to your parents for fi-

nancial help. If they're giving you money to bail you out of a problem, it's not wrong for them to state certain conditions or desires to protect their investment. But those conditions still need to be within reason.

Regardless of any conditions, however, your parents' or in-laws' help does not *buy* them a permanent seat on the board of directors of your life. They're never allowed a "controlling" interest.

The bottom line is, honor your parents and your in-laws—no matter what they do. Honor them to their face. Honor them behind their backs. Honor them when life with them is wonderful. Honor them when life with them gets frustrating. If you honor them in that way, Exodus 20:12 promises you a long life and blessing.

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Principle 2: Leaving & Cleaving

As I said earlier, the first thing God ever said about marriage is that we have to leave our mothers and fathers in order to cleave unto our spouses. *Leaving* simply means making that healthy separation between you and your parents for the sake of bonding with your spouse.

When there is a problem with "leaving," most often it's a matter of a parent who won't let go of the child. Usually it's mothers, more so than fathers, who have a hard time "letting go." That's why for generations mothers-in-law have been stereotyped as being intrusive and problematic for their children's marriages. But, certainly, that's not always the case.

Still, the most difficult of relationships is usually between a wife and her mother-in-law.

Typically, the mother is insecure and jealous of her daughter-in-law. Suddenly, the son who once depended upon her is now depending on another woman.

It is so important that a son not allow his mother to criticize or undermine his wife—her cooking, her abilities as a wife and a mother—or his relationship with her.

By the same token, it's important that a son not complain about his wife to his parents.

A rule of thumb is, if you and your spouse need any kind of advice or marriage counseling, go to a pastor, a godly friend or Christian counselor. Don't go to your parents.

Now, the other side to this "leaving" issue is that parents need their space, too. They need church, friends, hobbies, as well as time for their own marriage. Even if you have a parent who is widowed, he or she still needs interests and relationships apart from you.

Couples sometimes allow a parent or in-law to intrude into their marriage because they feel sorry for them.

For example, you may have a parent who sits at home alone and lets everyone know how lonely he or she is and how much they want you to visit them.

Well, studies have shown that even parents whose children are close to them get lonely if they don't have friends their own age. Responding to feelings of guilt or sorrow about your parent's loneliness will not fix your parent, but it will break you.

If you have parents like this, encourage them to get involved in church, outside interests or volunteer work. The point is to build other relationships. If they refuse, don't feel sorry for them and don't sacrifice your marriage to make up for their stubbornness. Just let them know that you love them and will spend an appropriate amount of time with them.

In general, "problem in-laws" usually fit a profile. To begin with, they're usually widowed, or have a weak relationship with their spouse. They of-

ten lack “significance” in other areas of life. They’re usually overly attached to their children and derive too much of their self-worth from them. Consequently, they have a difficult time letting go when their kids leave home. And they typically become adversarial with their children’s spouses.

If you see a parent lining up with this profile, take the responsibility to pray for them, to love them and to tell them the truth. And the truth is, you’re not responsible for “fixing” them. It may break your heart to confront these kinds of issues, but better that than allowing it to break your marriage.

Now, if you have parents going through severe times, such as a serious illness, you should always be committed to caring for them. That would include giving grace to your spouse if he or she is having to tend to a parent, or parents. But if you are the one having to attend to a parent, be careful not to ignore the needs of your spouse for too long, or too frequently.

Also, if you’re in a situation where a parent needs to live with you for a while so you can care for him or her, know that this is rarely a wise long-term solution. You should probably consider other options.

The principle of separation is important, but it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t care for our parents in times of genuine distress and need. In fact, the way we care for our parents and honor them as they age and go through difficult times should set a good example to our children.

Finally, on the more proactive side to all this, you can ensure you have enough time *alone* with your spouse—and your immediate family, if you have children—by setting boundaries for your relationship with your parents and in-laws. Those boundaries can be as simple as asking them to call before they come over to your house for a visit. Take the initiative to place limits on the frequency of your parents’ visits, and the length of their visits.

As you take these practical steps and follow them consistently, your marriage will have the separation—or *leaving*—necessary for you and your spouse to be able to *cleave*.

Principle 3: Protection

The next principle to remember when establishing “boundaries” in your marriage when it comes to parents and in-laws is *protection*.

This principle of protection follows closely on the heels of *separation*, or leaving, because it’s basically just enforcing the boundaries you’ve established by separating your household from that of your parents and in-laws.

You are responsible for protecting your marriage and family from the intrusion of your parents. While it can be very difficult and awkward for you to tell your in-laws to “back off,” it is by far much easier for you to communicate this kind of “tough love” to your own parents.

Though Karen and I have been married nearly 30 years, I am still highly cautious of correcting Karen’s parents. Karen, however, can easily do it because of her relationship with them. The same is true of my parents. It’s much easier for me to confront my parents when it comes to reinforcing boundaries than it is for Karen.

Like it or not, you are the one responsible for communicating and enforcing the parameters of your marriage to your parents, particularly when problems arise concerning those parameters. If you don’t take on that responsibility, then you are setting up your spouse to become an open target for your parents to criticize or to try and control. Even if your spouse refuses to tolerate any kind of control from your parents, there will still be damage to your marriage because you were not willing to stand up for your spouse.

Now, there are a couple of exceptions to this principle of protection.

The first is when one or both in-laws have an overpowering personal-

ity and you and your spouse agree that, of the two of you, the non-related spouse is the one strong enough to deal with them. In this case, the non-related spouse should be the one to address the issue at hand. But you must both still be in agreement and act as a united front.

The other exception is when you personally need to confront your in-laws concerning a serious violation of boundaries in your marriage, and your spouse is either absent, or is not willing to deal with the problem.

An example would be child abuse, or some other type of destructive behavior. In a situation like that, you cannot simply sit back and watch the destruction happen before your eyes for the sake of protocol. No, you must protect your family and children—first and foremost.

Understand that the principle of protection does not undo the principle of honor. You're still required to honor your parents and in-laws. But while honoring them, you still have the responsibility to enforce boundaries in your marriage, making sure that nothing that they do adversely affects your marriage, your spouse or your children.

Principle 4: Friendship

Finally, in establishing appropriate boundaries so you can have the best possible relationship with your in-laws, you need to apply the principle of *friendship*.

I met with a couple in my office one day that was having a problem with the husband's intrusive and controlling parents. It seemed that every time his parents came over for a visit, it wasn't long before they would take over the home and the children. They would even go to the extreme of rearranging furniture in this couple's house, taking over the disciplining of their children and criticizing the domestic skills of their son's wife. It was obvious the husband's parents felt as though they had an inherent right to run the

home as long as they were there, and their extremely controlling behavior left the couple perplexed.

When the couple in my office asked me what they should do, I responded with a question.

“How would you respond if one of your friends came into your home and did what your parents are doing?” I asked.

“We wouldn’t tolerate it!” they quickly replied in unison.

“Then what’s so different about your parents that you would allow them to get away with it?” I fired back at them.

They both looked at me with that *I’ve seen the light!* look.

The couple immediately knew that it would be inappropriate for a friend to act as these parents were acting. Yet, they realized that they had been tricked into applying a different set of rules for his parents...just because they were *family*. In this case, there is no different set of rules.

Granted, when you marry, your parents are still more important than your friends. Your relationship with them is very precious. Nonetheless, when it comes to your home and the boundaries within your marriage, no one has the right to walk in and take over.

When Karen and I go to our children’s homes, we respect them and act toward them the same as we would if we were at a friend’s house. We don’t try to take control. We don’t show up to criticize. We don’t do anything differently, or behave any differently, than we would if we were visiting a good friend.

Love your parents as the dear family they are. But when it comes to what you do and do not allow them to do to you or around you—remember the principle of *friendship*.

Certainly, we all owe a great deal to our parents for their love and sacrifice in raising us. But as we remember all of the good they’ve done for us in

the past, and as we honor them for their valuable presence in our lives, we must do so with a good *fence* between us.

The fence should not be so tall that we cannot see them, or so wide that we push them too far away. Yet, that fence must be tall enough and wide enough to make sure it cannot be stepped over or ignored.

Hence, the only way across the fence is to walk through a clearly marked gate that we have opened *together* for them as we both guard it vigilantly from being violated.

