The Law of . . .	
Sowing and Reaping	Our actions have *consequences*. Someone *will* bear them. *Don't interrupt this law by regularly bailing others out.*
Responsibility	We are responsible *to*, not *for* each other. *We are to* love *one another, not* be *one another.*
Power	We do not have power over *other people* *We hardly have enough power over ourselves*
Respect	If we wish our boundaries to be respected we must respect those of others *For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*
Motivation	We must be free to say no before we can wholeheartedly say yes. *"Acts of love" are worthless if we don't feel to have a choice*
Evaluation	We need to evaluate the effects our boundaries cause others *Hurt and harm are not the same – pain may eventually lead to growth*
Proactivity	Boundaries must express what you stand *for*, not just what you are *against* *Solve problems on the basis of your values, wants, and needs*
Envy	We will never get what we want if we focus on what others have *Envy keeps us empty and unfulfilled*
Activity	*We* need to take the initiative to solve our problems *Don't wait for your spouse to go the first step*
Exposure	Boundaries must be communicated *Otherwise they are invisible to others*

4 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.

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 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:

1. 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.
2. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.

4.4 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

- *Do you feel I respect your right to say no to me?*
- *Do I give you guilt messages (for instance by crying), withdraw, become angry, or attack you when you set a limit?*
- *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.

4.5 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:

1. We may fear *losing the love* of our spouse or even being abandoned.
2. 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.
4. We may fear *loneliness* and give in to earn "love".
5. We may fear to *be a bad person* and believe that to love always means to say yes.
6. We may be afraid of *guilty feelings* and try to compensate these by "good deeds".
7. We may fear to *hurt the feelings of others* who have done good to us. We feel that we owe them.
8. 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.

4.6 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.

4.7 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.

1. *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.

2. 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.

4.8 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.

4.9 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.

1. The active spouse may *dominate* the passive one or *feel abandoned* by him or her.
2. 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.

4.10 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.