7 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.

7.1 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.

7.2 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

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

7.2.1 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.*

7.2.2 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?

- 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.

- 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

- connect emotionally
- connect intellectually
- connect spiritually
- think for yourself and express your opinion

- say no
- say a wholehearted yes and commit to it
- compromise
- be free, instead of being controlled by circumstances, people, or moods
- have an appropriate sense of power and assertiveness
- be vulnerable and share feelings
- be responsible and follow through with what you are responsible for
- have a minimal amount of organization (including budgeting and bookkeeping)
- be real, without trying to be perfect
- accept imperfection and have grace and forgiveness
- learn and grow
- grasp and use your talents
- take risks
- have initiative
- be sexual
- have a moral sense
- 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)**.

7.3 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.

7.3.1 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

1. learning to develop our own thoughts instead of reiterating what others say
2. 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)**
4. 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.

7.3.2 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:*
>
> 1. *He doesn't make enough money to provide for her needs.*
> 2. *He works too much and makes her unhappy by being away so often.*
> 3. *He forgets to do things that are important to her.*
> 4. *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

1. *Scott doesn't make enough money to buy a new car every two years.*
2. *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.*
4. *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.

7.3.3 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".

7.4 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.

7.4.1 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.

7.4.2 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.

7.4.3 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.

- What if one likes going out and the other prefers to stay home?
- What if one wants sexual intimacy more often than the other?
- What if one wants a big house and the other wants to save money to feel secure?
- 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?
- 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?
- What if one likes to go to sports events and the other is not interested at all?
- What if one is a Democrat and the other a Republican?
- What if one believes in the death penalty and the other doesn't?
- What if one likes living in the Northeast and the other prefers the Southwest?
- 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.

7.4.4 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.

7.5 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.

7.5.1 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.

7.5.2 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?

7.5.3 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.