9 Protecting Marriage from Outside Intruders

Many married couples experience that their relationship changes over time. During the first years of the relationship, they had spent many evenings just talking with each other. They wanted to share joys, hurts, and hearts. There was a closeness between the two of them that just made them want to get to know one another more and more. Both were sure that they had found the soul mate they had been longing for.

But as the relationship progresses, the constraints of everyday life seem to take control of their marriage: children, career, friends & relatives, church, – all very good in themselves, but in the end a burden for the marriage. Suddenly the couple has to realize that their relationship revolves more around such things and people than around each other. The closeness between the two seems to have disappeared and although both spouses realize how much they suffer from that, they have no idea how to deal with the emptiness that has crept into their marriage.

9.1 The outside affects the relationship

The situation that I just described is more common that we may wish to believe and cannot be solved by putting the blame on the other spouse. Quite often *both* partners have the feeling that they are the only ones who invest into the marriage while the other one just goes after his or her own interests. But that is not necessarily the case. Even if both spouses try to make their marriage work, they may feel an increasing distance between each other.

How can this be?

The answer is simpler than we may want to realize: we let the outside intrude into our marriage. Not on purpose, of course. It just happens . . . because we do not protect our marriage *actively*.

We may believe that as long as we don't break out of our marriage, nothing bad may enter into it. But this is not so. There are many things in the world that compete for our love, and sometimes these forces are so strong that they get between us and our mate and diminish our relationship. Here are a few examples of such intruders.

- Work
- Children
- Outside hobbies and interests
- Sports
- In-laws
- Friends
- Church
- Financial involvements
- Television
- Internet
- Computer games
- Shopping
- Illness
- Addictions
- Affairs

Most of these aren't bad in themselves, but the can be destructive for a relationship, when they come between a couple's love. The pressures, temptations and even genuinely good opportunities coming from the outside are limitless. They don't wait for invitation to intrude into our marriage – they show up by themselves.
If we want to prevent that from happening, we must become active and protect our marriage. We have to recognize the dangers and put up well balanced boundaries, *before* these things come between us and our spouse. We need to learn to say no to them, before they have become so strong, that we can't seem to fend them off anymore. We must learn to work diligently but to say no to excessive demands of our boss at work, as they will grow if we give in to them too often. We have to teach limits to our children, so that they learn to respect our need to spend time without them. We have to learn to honor our parents while still being able to say no to to them. Whatever or whoever we're dealing with – we have to make clear that only one human being can have top priority in our life. And that is our spouse. The later we start that, the more difficult it will be ... but it is never too late to start.
This is not just a recommendation that comes from experience. It is a command from God.

> They are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate **(Matthew 19:6)**.

We must guard our marriage, so that the outside world cannot separate it. We must protect its core – the love between husband and wife. This doesn't come for free – it will cost us a lot. But our marriage is only as strong as what we invest into it.
In the previous chapter we talked about values and that we will only get what we value highly. If we do not put a very high value on what will make our marriage grow, then other influences will take over. But if we invest into our marriage and spend time, effort, and sacrifice in protecting our marriage from such influences, the chances for (eventually) having a rock solid marriage are quite high.

> Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. **(Matthew 13:45–46)**.

The merchant in this parable shows us what our attitude towards our relationship should be. It is a pearl that we treasure so highly that we "forsake all others", as many weddings vows say. This is not easy. We pay a high price to preserve it, but we know it is much more worth than what we pay for it.

Marriage is designed to be an exclusive club, a two-person arrangement that provides a safe place for each spouse's soul. There is no space for a third party to receive an equal share in a marriage, because that can easily disrupt the safety of the relationship. With a third party present, our love gets divided. A part of our heart is taken away from our spouse, where it belongs, and brought to an outside source. For instance:

- a wife may tell her best friend how unhappy she is with her husband's behavior but – out of misunderstood submission – doesn't let him know her feelings,
- a husband may be more invested in his parents than in his wife,
- a spouse makes her child a confidant and becomes closer to it than to her mate.

Such situations seldomly arise out of bad intentions but nevertheless betray the trust between the spouses and fracture the union that God had intended to develop in the marriage. *Triangulation*, as such situations are called, is painful and unjust, because a third party receives what is due to your spouse. Your spouse never hears from you what you tell others about him. God hates the deception and indirectness of triangulation – because it is honesty and love that build a marriage, not the recommendations of outsiders.

> ...and a gossip separates close friends (**Proverbs 16:28**).

> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ (**Ephesians 4:15**)

Of course, we all need close friends in whom we can confide and who confide in us. But if that drives us away from our spouse, we certainly stepped over the line. Conversely, if you find yourself in the situation where a friend confides in you but not in her spouse, be aware of the dangers of that situation. In spite of your good intentions and willingness to help, you may actually drive the couple apart if you don't insist that your friend talks to her spouse first.
Married love requires a great deal of safety for true intimacy to grow, as it brings out the most vulnerable and fragile parts of our personality. Where there is safety, we can come out of our isolation and self-centeredness and work together on our individual weaknesses. But with a third party involved, there is not enough safety for these parts to emerge and the bond between the two spouses cannot grow stronger.

Saying no to others – whether to people, things, or tasks – is not easy. Sometimes it is hard work, causes anxiety, and may upset others. But in order to say *yes* to your marriage, you must be able to say *no* to other things. You simply do not have the time, resources, and energy to do everything you want and to please everyone around you. If you do not learn to say *no* to others, you will eventually find out that you have been saying *no* to your marriage all the time.
Marriage involves more than keeping the love between you and your spouse alive. It also means forsaking, or leaving behind other things.

> For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (**Genesis 2:24**).

This is not easy. Many newlyweds feel disheartened to find that they have to say *no* to so many things to maintain their marriage. Before they got married, they could take care of career, friends, sports, trips, and other activities. But now they restricted by their marriage and they almost resent their partner for this.

But marriage is not an extension of singleness, where you take your spouse along. It takes time to build the connection between the two of you – a lot of time – and this time has to be taken away from others. Marriage means forsaking some freedom in order to gain growth. You can't have both at the same time. If you don't make forsaking a part of everyday life, you always run danger of adding the wrong thing (bad influences) to your marriage and subtracting the good (closeness and honesty) from it. All "intruder problems" are ultimately caused by either of the two or both.

9.2 When the outside is not an intruder

Keeping third parties out of our marriage does of course not mean that we should spend all of our time only with our spouse and that any outside relationship and activity is "bad" or an act of disloyalty. Marriage was designed by God as a union between a man and a woman that leads to a more meaningful and fruitful life. Our spouse is our prime address for finding comfort, help, truth and growth.

But marriage is not the *only* place for that. It was never designed to be the source for all life for us. That would be idolatry, because only God and his resources are our life source.

> He is before all things and in him all things hold together **(Colossians 1:17)**.

The marriage bond is only one of many ways in which God provides for our needs. Marriages in which one spouse is the sole source of support for the other often end up in a parent-child dynamic. One spouse demands that the other functions as the parent she never had. The other attempts to do that out of a misconception what marriage is really about. But eventually he feels drained and resentful and then the "child" spouse feels abandoned and unloved.

In some marriages both spouses "parent" each other in different ways – for instance she is the only emotional contact for her husband and in turn he takes over all the financial and business aspects of their lives. This may look like a good arrangement, but taken to such an extreme it is not healthy at all. In Section 7 we talked about the need for both spouses to grow into complete and mature adults. Parenting your spouse prevents her from becoming that.

Marriage simply does not have all the resources that a couple needs. We also need close friends who can meet some of our needs. We can receive the love, structure, and approval we need also from those who have God's interests and values in their hearts.

> For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother **(Matthew 12:50)**.

In the end we have to learn to avoid extremes and find the right balance. We need outside relationships and activities to get some of our needs met that our spouse simply cannot meet. But at the same time we have to make sure that these external influences do not intrude into our marriage and take a part of our heart away from our spouse.

9.3 What promotes intruders?

Usually, intruders do not show up unexpectedly. They are a sign of some deeper issues in the marriage. They are the fruit, not the cause of the problem. Even affairs don't simply happen to a marriage that was healthy until "the other" showed up.

Quite often, other things or people intrude into our marriage when we experience some form of struggle in our marriage. It is not that they haven't been there all the time, but now we are more willing to allow them to come between us and our spouse. When a marriage contains conflict or hurt, we tend to busy ourselves in other people and activities, because that is less painful than facing some seemingly unsolvable problem at home day after day. The problem does not go away, but activity anesthetizes the deficits and pain and seems to fill the vacuum within us.

There are, of course, other possible reasons for intruders in our marriage. Most of them have to do with weaknesses in our character, which become more apparent as the intimacy between us and our spouse grows.

Thus before we deal with the with the specific intruders, that is the symptoms, we have to bring the real issues, which promote the presence of intruders in our marriage, to light and deal with them first. Let us look at some of the most common issues.

9.3.1 A natural consequence of intimacy

The very nature of emotional intimacy can become one of the reasons for vulnerability to outside intruders. Intimacy means that you get to know your spouse as he really is, with all his strengths and weaknesses, positive characteristics and faults, sins, and imperfections. Because there is no need for barriers, you are the one person who is allowed to see it all. And you will discover many aspects of his personality that you have never anticipated during courtship. Even worse, you will discover some negative traits that you would have never believed to have in your own personality and your spouse has to suffer from them.

Negative traits, by definition, are hard to live with. When you discover them, you will face a new kind of challenge: you have to accept yourself and your spouse as both of you are right now and learn to overcome your negative traits together. That, among other things, is what it means to hold together in good times as well as in bad ones.

> Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. **(1. Corinthians 13:7–8a)**

But if you are not yet able to deal with such shocking new discoveries, the growing intimacy between you and your spouse makes your marriage vulnerable to two threats.

First of all, noticing your own weaknesses and imperfections can be a frightening experience. This fear may have many causes, such as

- Fear of being rejected by your spouse for your flaws
- Fear of feeling increasingly inadequate or like a total failure

- Fear of having to admit dependency and need for help
- Guilt that you may be draining your spouse by your problems

Fear, as we have mentioned so often, is the opposite of love.

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

If you are burdened by such fears, chances are that you will distance yourself emotionally from your spouse. But distance creates a breach in the trust relationship and this will give intruders an opportunity to get between you and your spouse. Your fear causes you to take a part of your heart away from your spouse and devote it to something or someone else. But that only increases your distance and your fears will by no means be lessened – they are just covered up for a while.

The second threat has to do with discovering the flaws and imperfections of your spouse. Ideally, your love grows along with the relationship and the increased openness will be accompanied by increased grace, compassion, and forgiveness.

> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" **(Matthew 18:21–22)**.
>
> Do not judge, or you too will be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven **(Luke 6:37)**.
>
> If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says "I repent", forgive him **(Luke 17:3–4)**.

But you may not be ready to handle the negative sides of your spouse for several reasons. For instance

- you may want your spouse to be stronger than he really is, *Weaknesses*
- you may be disappointed in his imperfections *Failings*
- you may not be able to tolerate living with a sinner *Sins*
- you may only accept positive emotions *Negative feelings*
- your spouse's faults may remind you of your own *Aspects of yourself*

If you lack compassion and forgiveness, you may begin to distance yourself from your spouse when you experience his negative sides. You react to his problems by passing judgment on him and pulling away emotionally, which in turn will allow third parties to step in between you two.

In both cases it is not the imperfection itself that causes the problem, but your inability to deal with the growing intimacy between you and your spouse. Whether you can't accept your own imperfections or those of your spouse, your withdrawal is a threat to the integrity of your connection.

The only solution to this problem is to take responsibility for the issue and begin to reconnect. You may have to admit your fear to your spouse. Quite often you will find out that your fears had little to do with reality. In other cases admitting them to your mate may warm his heart toward you and reduce your distance. Or you may have to deal with your own condemning spirit and realize how much your spouse is hurt by your withdrawal when he does "something wrong". And then you can work on both of your problems together.
Either way, it is very helpful if a couple learns signaling to each other when one feels that either love and truth are not present. If you are too scared to show some negative truth to your spouse, you may have to talk about this fear first. When you are sure of the love and compassion of your spouse, it is much easier to go into the truth. On the other hand, if your spouse appears distant to you, you may have to invite him to let you know what is going on. When you are sure that your spouse is completely honest with you, it will be easier to connect in love.

9.3.2 Not knowing your limits

Another common reason for the presence of intruders in a marriage is that one or both of the spouses may not be aware of their own limitations. They may care a lot for each other, but nevertheless spend a lot of time and energy on other things. The do want to be involved with their spouse – just not right now. They actually believe that there will be plenty of time for taking care of their spouse ... later, but they do not realize that their resources are limited. So the moment for being involved with their spouse never comes, at least not often enough.
As so often, the problem has not just to do with the "limitless" spouse, who jeopardizes the marriage by giving too much room to the outside world. It also has to do with the people who enable this kind of behavior and protect him from seeing the natural consequences of his actions. All too often there has been someone else who picked up the pieces, first the parents, later friends and co-workers, and eventually his spouse. Why should he become anxious about his growing marriage problems? After all, hasn't there always been a happy ending to all situations he encountered?
A person who has lived with a world of human safety nets often has one of the following convictions.

- nothing bad will happen if he doesn't get to fulfill his responsibilities,
- if something bad happens, nobody would really be affected,
- if someone is really bugged about it, someone else will bail him out and all is forgiven and forgotten.

In the end, he won't be anxious about anything – there will be a good end to everything. This "don't worry – be happy" attitude makes him quite careless and the marriage will suffer from that.

A while ago we have talked a lot about the law of sowing and reaping (see Section 4.1): actions always have consequences.

> Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature from that nature will reap destruction (**Galatians 6:7–8**).

But the careless spouse doesn't realize that he is sowing destruction, because someone else carries the consequences for him. He overcommits his time, she comes to his rescue and organizes his schedule. He overspends, she figures out how to get them out of trouble again. She is the one who suffers – not he. The intruders win and the couple loses.

> A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again (**Proverbs 19:19**).

There is only one way out. Stop rescuing your spouse over and over again. Let him face the consequences of his action – the angry people and missed deadlines. That won't be easy in the beginning, but eventually he will become more realistic, see how much you have done for him in the past, and start investing more time and energy into what is really valuable, that is your relationship.

> A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool (**Proverbs 17:10**).

9.3.3 Taking the marriage for granted

A closely related issue is that one or both of the partners may not be aware of the fragility of marriage. They adopt the mentality that everything is o.k. as long as no major crises are going on. In a sense, they take the marriage for granted and do not work on it unless they are really in trouble.

This is a very immature perspective of the institution of marriage. Marriage can go a long time before you feel the influence of intruders getting between the two of you. You will hardly notice how you drift slowly from a deep connection into a comfortably numb one . . . until you suddenly realize that something very important has been lost. You are not inside each other's hearts anymore because other things have occupied them.

Marriage does not start at the wedding and goes on forever all by itself. It needs to be worked on day by day! And it will be only as good as the investment you make in it. You either grow and deepen the connection to your spouse, or your marriage will start to deteriorate.

There is no such thing as an "out of the blue" marriage problem. Statements like "everything was fine until he suddenly became abusive" or "our marriage was good until I found out about the affair" are far away from reality. When a marriage deteriorates, there are always warning signs such as

- increasing withdrawal
- unresolved differences from which the couple simply walks away
- preferences for others to meet needs that the marriage used to meet
- interests and relationships that your spouse does not talk about

In **Romans 6:15** Paul warns us not to take our freedom in Christ for granted.

> What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!

We can't go on as before just because we are saved. In the same way you should not take your marriage for granted, but regularly take time to talk about the aspects of your relation that need improvement. As in your annual physical you want to make sure that you address the real issues: "How do you feel about our relationship? Is there anything that I do that hurts or bothers you? In what area should we be closer?". These are hard questions if you take them seriously. But they get to the point and help you identify and resolve problems before they become too big.

9.3.4 Problems in setting boundaries with others

Sometimes, third parties intrude into our marriage because we have never learned to say no to other people. We don't know how to turn down our boss or our customer who always asks for extra work time. We don't want to disappoint our church by refusing to join the fifth committee. We don't want to hurt our elderly mother who feels so alone unless we spend every other evening together with her. We give everything for the people around us and people love us for this.

There is only one person who is disappointed – our own spouse. He loves our noble character, the willingness to sacrifice. But he suffers from the fact that we belong to everyone, not just to him. By not saying no to others, we say no to our spouse.

People who have difficulties in setting limits often feel torn between others and their spouse. They are divided, unstable in all they do and never at rest, because they always feel guilty about letting others down and they feel even more guilty about letting their spouse down.

If you find yourself in such a situation, you need to realize that your problem is not all those demanding people in your life but your *desire for approval* and possibly a great *fear of losing love* – coupled with the misconception that love is tied to "being good". And you're probably less afraid of turning down your spouse that your boss our your pastor – as if working on our relation with these people would be more important than caring for our mate.

Although you have responsibilities to the outside world and should be faithful in your job and active in your church, your top priority should be your spouse **(Proverbs 4:23, Revelation 2:10c, Genesis 2:24)**. The love of your spouse is more important than what other people think of you. This means you have to become honest with others about your real limitations and turn down people who demand too much of you. Your marriage will certainly benefit from this.

If you're married to a person who is afraid of saying no to others and feels guilty about it, refrain from nagging because this only increases her fears. But do not ignore the problem either, as it won't go away by itself. Offer your help in a loving way and start working on the root of the problem together.

9.3.5 Inability to live with differences

Sometimes a couple allows the outside world to intrude into their marriage because one or both of the spouses cannot deal with the differences between them. As they realize that their views of theology, politics, career, family, finances, entertainment, and even intimacy differ – sometimes even strongly – they begin to invest more and more time and energy in separate activities and friends – until they are more invested in them than in their marriage.

While the existence of separate friends and activities is often beneficial for a relationship, the marriage should still be the home base for our feelings and souls. If you go to the outside because our spouse is so different from us, you have become the victim of a huge misconception. Being different is *not* a problem for a marriage. In fact, it should be a benefit, because the alternative viewpoint of your spouse can enlarge your horizon **(Proverbs 15:14a, 15:31–32, 16:20a, 18:2)**. Constantly interacting with the feelings and opinions of another human being will help you adjusting your thinking in matters you were so sure to have it all figured out. We need these differences.

> If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they all were one part, where would the body be? **(1. Corinthians 12:17–19)**.

The ability to deal with differences is a sign of our maturity. If we can't accept the differences of our spouse, we easily become the prey of intruders who agree with us. Triangulation begins at this point: we find people who will agree with our opinion, especially about the bad points of our spouse.

You don't have to give up your own reality in order to understand your spouse's different viewpoints. If you're mature, you can appreciate the sentiments of your spouse and come to a negotiated agreement, using love, values, principles, and also sacrifice. Your differences do not create a problem in your marriage. Immaturity does.

Occasionally, of course, differences can become a source of conflict in your marriage. This is quite normal, as you will encounter situations where both of you have strong, but opposing opinions. If both of you are mature, you will try to resolve even such strong differences.

However, some people fear these conflicts more than others, because they can't feel connected while disagreements and differences are present. They are afraid of losing the love of their spouse and avoid conflict at all costs. As a consequence, the distance between them and their spouse increases and the become vulnerable to intruders.
If you are afraid of conflict, be aware of the dangers of avoiding it. Conflict is an ally, not an enemy, as it can help you sharpen both your marriage and your own personality.

> As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. **(Proverbs 27:17)**.

9.4 Dealing with specific intruders

Intruders, as we have pointed out, are not the cause of marriage problems, but the result of the real problem. Nevertheless, they weaken our marriage bond once they have come between us and our spouse, which means that we need to find ways to deal with them. Different intruders require different ways of dealing with them, since they usually point to different kinds of problems that promoted their presence.
When dealing with intruders, we have to keep in mind, that we need to deal with the real cause. If we don't, our solution will only be a temporary one and different intruders will show up soon after we have managed to get rid of the current ones.

> When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says "I will return to the house I left". When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean an put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. **(Luke 11:24–26)**.

In the following we will look at a few examples of intruders. Dealing with them means evaluating what these symptoms tell about our marriage, how they affect the less-involved spouse, and how to negotiate a solution that enables both partners to grow and strengthen the love between each other.

9.4.1 Work

Overworking is more prevalent in the United States than in most other countries of the world. Many people define ourselves by what we do rather than by who they are in the sight of God. We all know the stereotype of a workaholic husband whose wife feels that he loves his job and his career more than her. While in some rare cases this may actually be the case, the real issues are often quite different. Here are a few examples and possible solutions.

Attachment problems: A person's inability to relate emotionally to his spouse may cause him to flee to work, where he feels more competent.
Since he is apparently not able to deal with his attachment problems himself, his spouse may have to help him first to own his problem and then to connect on the emotional levels.

Desire for approval: We all need the praise and approval of people from time to time. In today's society many people believe that the affirmation of work is the only one that really counts, and some may actually get addicted to that.
A person with such an attitude towards life needs to experience that love is much more worth than admiration. That will help him set his his priorities straight, give up the demand to be praised at all times, and thus return to his family.

> What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? **(Matthew 16:26a)**.

> But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you **(Matthew 6:33)**.

A sense of inferiority: Some people feel that they are just not as good as other people and try to prove their worth by working overtime to reach better results. Such a person needs to experience that he is accepted and loved the way he is – both by God **(Psalms 139:14)** and his spouse. Love is much more worth than accomplishment, and as soon as he realizes that he will be able to let go of trying the impossible.

Lack of safety: Some people react to hurt in their marriage by withdrawing to work. They feel not safe enough with their partner so they look elsewhere to experience more positive relationships.
In this case the couple may need external help, so that both partners feel safe enough in their marriage to endure conflict without withdrawing. They need to know that the other spouse will always accept them, even when they disagree over some matter.

Lack of freedom: Sometimes, a person feels controlled by his spouse and works seems to him the only way to get some freedom.
This is a serious problem, which requires both partners to work hard on themselves. He needs to work on being more direct about is needs while his spouse needs to work on respecting his boundaries.

What can we do in these scenarios? Demanding that the overworker should spend less time at work will not solve the problem but only increase his fears. We also have to keep in mind that God expects us to work sincerely and diligently.

> Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men **(Colossians 3:23)**.

So the answer is not to quit work, but to find the right attitude towards it, while dealing with the character and relationship problems. A spouse can do a lot to help her partner let go of excessive work and devote more time and energy to the relationship. The more she invests into helping him, the more she will receive in return.

> Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured to you **(Luke 6:38)**.

9.4.2 Children

> Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.
> **(Ephesians 6:1–4)**

Children are built-in intruders on a marriage. They need so much attention, so much help and assistance, so often. Immature parents often fail to see that children, despite all their needs, also need boundaries, and end up putting parenting above their marriage. As a result, their marriage will be in deep trouble soon. Again, the real cause has little to do with the children themselves but with character issues of the spouses.

Hiding intimacy conflicts: The couple may have problems with finding the right balance between intimacy and control, yet fails to deal with the issue. Devoting more and more time to children is one way to avoid the problem without feeling guilty. After all, you can never give enough time to kids.

Both partners must realize that they need to deal with their intimacy conflict. They need to bring out their conflicting needs, desires, and fears in a safe and loving atmosphere and then begin to work through them.

Overidentifying with children: Some parents feel totally responsible for their children's lives and have a hard time letting go. They feel that their spouse, being an adult, can handle the neglect and that they must devote every minute to their children. If they don't, they feel guilty of being a mother who abandons her children.

Such parents have serious misconceptions about raising children (and will later find out that their children are not thankful for that at all). They need to learn to allow age-appropriate space between them and their children (see Section 6.4) and to give them the chance to become separate individuals. This will not only help the children to grow into responsible adults but also allow the couple to become closer.

Children appear easier to deal with: Sometimes a parent has the impression that dealing with children is easier than dealing with a spouse. He feels that the kids listen to what he says while his spouse doesn't.

In such cases the couple needs to work again on respecting each other's boundaries. Each partner must know that his opinions are respected and listened to, without requiring his spouse to agree to them. Both spouses must help each other feeling both love and freedom.

Misperceptions about parenting: Right now, we live in a "childocentric" culture, which gives some parents the impression that caring for their children is all that counts. Some parents rather break up with their spouses than taking time and energy away from their children for the benefit of the relationship.

These parents have never thought about the fact that parenting is intended to be temporary and marriage permanent – not the other way around. They need to realize that this is a serious misperception and adjust their values appropriately.

9.4.3 Family

> Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you (**Exodus 20:12**).

In-laws – their interference with a couple's marriage has been the subject of many jokes and also of many sad stories. We hear of couples who don't have enough time for each other, because one of them feel guilty if she doesn't spend at least every other evening with her lonely mother or because the family drops in at every impossible time. We hear of of husbands who still compare everything their wife's do with the way mother used to do it. Or of couples whose marriage is essentially run by one of the spouses' parents who make all the important decisions. The stories go on and on, and many a marriage is in severe problems because in-laws intrude between the couple.
As before, the real issues are not the in-laws who don't seem to be willing to leave us alone, but character issues in one or both of the spouses.

Incomplete leaving: Some people experience that the real allegiance of their spouse is not with them but with her parents and siblings. For her, family (of origin) comes first and he gets what is left over.

In this case, the spouse hasn't completed the leaving process that is a prerequisite for becoming one with her partner.

> For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united with his wife and they will become one flesh (**Genesis 2:24**).

For a marriage to work, the spouse needs to loosen her ties with the family of origin and forge new ones with the new family she is creating through marriage. This doesn't mean that she can't have a close relationship with their extended families, but she needs to set proper boundaries with them to make sure that her spouse (apart from God) has topmost priority in her life.

Financial dependency: Some couples have gotten used to receiving financial support from one of the spouse's parents. They have supported them to get started, bailed them out in a financially troublesome situation, gave them a generous gift here and there . . . and after a while this became a habit. As a result, the financial decisions of the couple are essentially made by the parents.

What happens here is that one spouse or both are not adults yet as far as finances are concerned. They have not learned to say no to wishes that they cannot afford or are just plain irresponsible and thus constantly in trouble. To become mature adults, they have to learn financial responsibility, that is live within their means, being content with what they can afford, and paying for their own failures.

Codependency: Some people are just born to take care of their parents. Early in life they felt responsible for their parents and never learned to set proper boundaries between them and their sometimes irresponsible parents. Every time they tried to have a separate life they felt selfish.

While the Bible does teach that we should take care of parents in need **(1. Timothy 5:3–4)**, this does not mean that we have the duty to be available for them all the time. Some of the parent's needs are more imagined than real, and some of their real needs simply cannot be met by us. A couple needs to decide together, how much they can and want to give, such that they can love and appreciate the parent instead of growing resentful.

> After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. **(2. Corinthians 12:14b)**.

9.4.4 Friends

Good friends are a treasure in any marriage. They can help the couple to look beyond the horizon of the immediate relationship and may meet some needs of each individual that the spouse cannot meet. However, quite often a couple feels that friends have come between them. A husband may always find ways to spend time with his buddies and to avoid one-on-one times. A wife may come to life only when friends are around and appear bored when only her husband is present. A questionable best friend may interfere with the marriage. As before, the underlying issues have to do mostly with the couple and not with the friends themselves.

Superficiality: One partner may be more broad than deep and be afraid of the closeness that comes with intimacy. He avoids close relations and builds many superficial friendships.

Fear of intimacy has a lot to do with fear of being hurt or abandoned if somebody else gets too close. He needs to experience that his marriage is a safe place for him to open up and also realize that superficial friendships won't help him grow.

> A man of many companions may come to ruin. But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother **(Proverbs 18:24)**.

Hurt in the marriage: Sometimes, of course, a partner may have experienced rejection and deep hurt from his spouse, for instance by being constantly criticized for weaknesses, anger or needs. So friends become the place where he can open up.

In this case the other spouse needs to work on accepting all of her partner **(Luke 6:37)** and on developing an attitude of compassion and forgiveness when she has to rebuke him for some real sin **(Matthew 18:15, Luke 17:3)**.

Perfectionism: Some spouses have difficulties living with the fact that their spouse is not perfect. So they give up on him and invest in others who appear closer to perfection than he.

There are two things that need to be done here. The perfectionistic spouse must learn to let go of unrealistic demands while the couple should work on making her life good enough that she can feel comfortable although life is not ideal.

Sharing secrets with friends: Sometimes, one partner has secret conversations with friends about issues that his spouse knows nothing about. This does not only hurt his spouse but also prevents their relationship from becoming as deep as it is intended.

Sometimes this is just a bad habit that must be broken. Each partner must realize that spouses should have no serious secrets in their marriage. A close relationship is able to withstand even some of the darker realities of each partner and provides a safe place for finding a way out of them. But of course, some marriages are not stable enough for dealing with the full truth and may require a healthy setting such as pastoral counseling or therapy until they are strong enough to deal with what exists between them.

9.4.5 Affairs

Affairs are probably the most hurtful intruder for a marriage and have led to the death of many a struggling relationship. What should a couple do if the mutual trust has been broken by an affair. What should a husband do, when he finds out that his wife had a sexual relationship with some other man? What should a wife do, when she discovers that there is some other woman in her husband's life. Should she kick him out of the house for that? Should he divorce his sinful wife?
After all, an affair is adultery, a sin so great that the Bible condemns it over and over again. We all know that Jesus permitted divorce in this case.

> I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery **(Matthew 19:9)**.

Does that mean that a good Christian should file for divorce if his spouse has become unfaithful, because the marriage has been destroyed by her sinful behavior?
I don't believe so. An affair, as painful as it is, does not necessarily have to mean the end of a marriage. Although God permits divorce in the case of marital unfaithfulness, he doesn't demand it. Neither **Mark 10:1–12** nor **Luke 16:18** mention marital unfaithfulness as reason that allows us to divorce our spouse. And **Matthew 19:8** gives us the true reason why he permits it at all.

> Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning (**Matthew 19:8**).

Sometimes, it was better for the wife to sent away by her hard-hearted husband than to be neglected and mistreated for the rest of her life. It was for the sake of the unloved woman that God permitted her to be set free again, not for the sake of the unloving husband who wanted to get rid of her. But God never intended divorce to become a natural end to a marriage.

> "I hate divorce", says the Lord God of Israel (**Malachi 2:16**).
> Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate (**Matthew 19:6**).

An affair, like any other intruder, is only a symptom of deeper, probably quite severe problems in the marriage. So if your spouse is truly repentant, willing to give up the affair, and desires to do everything to repair the broken trust, you should be compassionate and forgiving and begin to work together on the real problems that have led to this situation.

> Love ... keeps no record of wrongs (**1. Corinthians 13:5**).

Sadly enough, some self-righteous Christians use **Matthew 5:32** as an excuse to get rid of their unfaithful spouse, even if she is repentant, instead of working on rebuilding their marriage together. This clearly indicates that they don't love their wives at all and – although superficially appearing as innocent victims – are as guilty of the death of their relationship as she is.

What then are the possible causes for affairs?

Emptiness in the marriage: Some spouses have lost the connection to their partner, desperately seek for someone to connect to, and fall for the first person that seems to offer what they miss in their marriage.

Narcissistic tendencies: Some people consider themselves as so perfect that they expect to be constantly admired and looked up to. They resent being reminded of their imperfection and search for somebody else to stroke their ego.

Victim-Perpetrator issues: In some marriages one spouse takes on the role of the helpless victim and views her partner as the predatory perpetrator. The victim will then seek out a rescuer-type to protect her from her evil spouse and develop closer ties to him than to her spouse. However, when the rescuer begins to show signs of flaws she will view him as perpetrator as well and the circle continues.

The only way to say no: Overly compliant people find themselves unable to set any limits in the marriage and feel overwhelmed by the expectations of their spouse. The affair becomes the only way to say no.

These examples indicate severe character problems or problems in the relationship that must be addressed immediately, probably with the support of joint counseling. But there is hope. In many cases, where the unfaithful spouse was truly repentant and both started working on the underlying problems, the affair actually served as a wake-up call for maturity and led to greater intimacy and strength in the marriage than before.

The above list of intruders is by no means complete. There are others, such as church, hobbies, television, internet, sports, shopping, and other addictions. They all need to be evaluated in a similar way to find out what their effect on the marriage is and what may be the real problem behind them. This will help finding a compromise that both partners can live with and that addresses the real problem in a way that the marriage bond is strengthened again.