

## 11 Resolving conflicts with your spouse

So far our discussion of conflicts has focused on dealing with particular situations: how shall a couple deal with conflicts that intrude into their relationship from the outside or arise from the inside? We have looked at steps for resolving conflicts that were tailored to the specific situation. These steps were based on the assumption that both partners are interested in addressing the conflict. In this case the *process* for dealing with the issues is easy, even if the issues themselves are quite difficult, because both partners are allies and work on solving the underlying problems together

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. (**Ecclesiastes 4:9-10**)

However, we don't always have such an ideal situation. One of us may not really be interested in working on a particular problem. He may not believe that the problem concerns him at all. He may refuse to help where his participation is needed. She may become angry when he suggests a solution that requires self-discipline and restraint. Sometimes the resistance is only imagined: we fear that our spouse doesn't care, is unwilling to change, or may react defensively when we confront him. As a consequence, we don't even try to address the problem. Either way, we become adversaries rather than allies, the necessary steps will not be initiated, and the conflict remains unresolved.

In this chapter we will look at ways for resolving conflicts with your spouse that depend on your own and your spouse's willingness to participate in a solution. We will first look at character traits that make it easy or difficult to resolve conflicts in a godly way. These will help you to find out whether you are a person who makes the solving problems more difficult than it should be and what changes you need to make to have a positive influence on your relationship. It will also help you to identify prejudices that you may have about your spouse and to interpret his reactions correctly instead of assuming that he doesn't care.

We will then look at strategies for resolving conflicts with your spouse. One is for the easy case where both of you are willing to establish and accept limitations so that you can work together on improving your relationship. The other is for the more difficult situation where you find out that your spouse actually refuses to become a responsible and active part in the solution of the problem. The latter will probably be the most difficult issue of this class, so we have to make sure that we understand it correctly and are willing to do the right thing – even if we find it strenuous.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few will find it. (**Matthew 7:13–14**)

God never promised us that marriage is always easy. Growth doesn't always come without pain, since it requires us to leave our comfort zone and to explore the path that God wants us to go. If we trust him, we will accept the difficulties he sets before us and the changes that he wants us to make. If we try to avoid these difficulties and only do what we feel comfortable with, then we have chosen the broad path, which may seem easier at first, but actually leads nowhere.

### 11.1 Boundary Lovers and Boundary Busters

Conflicts point at situations that require change. The way we deal with the situation right now apparently is not the one that helps us progress, since otherwise we wouldn't experience the conflict. In any such situation we have to face two aspects

- the issue to be dealt with, and
- the ability of the involved persons to deal with the issue

Most people make the mistake of focusing only on the first aspect while neglecting the second. However, it is the second aspect that decides how difficult the process of resolving a conflict will be. Even if you have to undergo some very tough changes, the process of detecting the real problems and facing them can be easy, if both of you are open to feedback, willing to look at yourself, able to see when you are wrong, and willing to accept limits. Since you don't fight against each other, you can focus all your energy on the issue to be dealt with.

With some couples, however, the second aspect is actually the bigger problem. They are not open to feedback, cannot see when they are wrong or admit it when they see it, do not like limits of any kind, and tend to blame everyone else for their problems. Instead of dealing with the issue itself, they try to make someone else responsible for dealing with it. In this case every trivial issue can lead to a major fight, since a *boundary buster* rather turns against her spouse than accepting that she is responsible for her own problems. Modern psychiatry calls such people "character disorders" and seldomly expects a lot of change from them. Boundary busters often have severe difficulties with building close relationships and often will rather leave the relationship than accepting the fact that *they* – not the circumstances and people around them – are the ones who need to change. However, there is hope. Even people who strongly resist boundaries can eventually realize that establishing and accepting limits is good for them and change their attitude and behavior.

As discussed before, boundaries are designed by God for a lot of good reasons. They protect love. They enhance freedom. They allow a couple to be separate individuals that are strongly connected. They help people see what their responsibilities are and what they are not. They enable both partners to restrict their own freedom without fear and to make the love between the two grow. When two people embrace the pain of receiving and respecting their mate's boundaries, love can only flourish and deepen, since many good things result when you preserve each others boundaries.

- You develop self-control and patience as described in **Galatians 5:22**.
- You become humble and open to correction – and even self-correcting (**Proverbs 13:18, 15:5, 29:15**).
- You appreciate your spouse for who he is – not for his usefulness for you (**1. Samuel 16:7b**).
- Your ability to empathize with your spouse’s needs, desires, and hurts increases.
- You depend more on your own values to make you happy instead of depending on your spouse’s reaction (**Psalms 37:3–4**).

All these contribute to your own personal growth and improve the relationship to your spouse. However, they do not come by themselves. They are consequences of your willingness to accept boundaries, which in turn is a result of your attitude towards them. *Boundary lovers* usually have most of the following character traits.

- They are willing to submit to God and their spouse (**Ephesians 5:21**).
- They are open to feedback from others and desire to gain understanding as a result of correction or confrontation (**Proverbs 15:32b**).
- They do not become defensive when they hear negative things about themselves.
- They accept responsibility for their own problems, feelings, attitudes, choices (**Deuteronomy 30:19b**), and behaviors (**Galatians 6:7b**).
- They have a biblical view of themselves, that is they are able to see themselves objectively and observe their behavior.
- They are quick to forgive and slow to anger (**1. Corinthians 13:5, James 1:19**).
- They trust in their spouse.
- They value the treasures of their spouse.
- They value their spouse as a separate individual, with different experiences (**Proverbs 27:17**) .
- They allow their spouse the freedom to be different from them.
- They respect the freedom of their spouse and his need for space.
- They realize their own constant need for growth and change.

All these traits show that you are open to the *truth*, the *freedom of others*, to your own *responsibility*, and to *love*. Obviously, nobody is perfect in all of these traits, so there is always a possibility for further improvement. Before you try to address and resolve conflicts with your spouse, it might be good to take a close look at these traits and see where you are and where you still need to improve. Ask God to show you what you don’t see and to help you make the necessary adjustments in your character.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me  
(**Psalm 51:10**).

Then you can go and confront the issues that you and your spouse need to address.

First take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your brother's eye (**Matthew 7:5**).

Unfortunately, not all of us are close to the above description of boundary lovers. In fact, some are pretty far away from that description. They do not want to accept that they still need to grow and change and that correction and limits from others are necessary for that (**Proverbs 12:1,15:12**). In fact, they hate correction and limits, and often this hate turns against the one who rebukes them (**Proverbs 9:8a**). This is *the position of one who attempts to take on the role of God*, who alone in the universe does not need to be corrected.

Of course, nobody likes to be described in these terms, and it is one of the main characteristic of boundary busters to deny that they actually have these negative character traits. They don't see anything negative in what they do, because they have the attitude that they should be able to do what they want and not be dictated by circumstances and people that put limits on their freedom. Some common examples that reveal this attitude are the following

- Your husband doesn't want to go out with you and you withdraw emotionally to punish him.
- Your wife asks you to share some of the housekeeping duties and you refuse.
- Your husband asks you to spend less and you blame him for not making enough money or giving you so little.
- You have a tendency to see many things that you don't like and complain a lot about your situation.
- Your husband confronts one of your faults and you blame him for what you do.
- Your wife confronts one of your faults and you just reverse the issue.
- Your husband wants some time for himself or go out alone with his buddies and you blame him for being selfish and unloving.
- Your wife wants to talk about a problem and you just say "that's your problem".
- Your husband disagrees with you and you blow up at him.
- Your mood depends a lot on how your spouse behaves and you easily become sulky (and remain so for quite some time).

No matter what the trigger for these reactions is – there is no excuse for them. Believe it or not, in each case you have made a choice that could have been made differently. You may not be aware of it, but you have chosen a reaction that hurts your spouse.

Obviously, since none of us is perfect, our reaction will occasionally be close to one or more of the abovementioned ones. Therefore it is good to examine ourselves (**1. Corinthians 11:28a**) and to check in which of these areas we fail and to do the necessary character work to outgrow our immaturity. The areas where we need to change may involve one or more of the following

- Respecting the freedom of your spouse
- Allowing your spouse to say no
- Admitting that you have been trying to control your spouse either aggressively (by anger) or through manipulation (guilt messages)
- Giving honest feedback to your partner without being afraid
- Becoming aware of your inability to truly control anyone or anything
- Submitting to God's process of learning self-control and acceptance of limits
- Restraining your tendency to withdraw from your spouse
- Restraining your tendency to attack your spouse or make him feel guilty
- Asking for your spouse's feedback when you cross her boundaries
- Accepting that your spouse has weaknesses
- Admitting faults when being confronted and asking for forgiveness
- Forgiving faults of your spouse, even before he repents
- Learning to be compassionate with your spouse's (negative) feelings

These tasks are not pleasant and often a lot of work. That is why you haven't done them before. It is realistic to see that growth involves pain. But the painful discipline will eventually bear good results in our lives.

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

**(Hebrews 12:11)**

We all have a tendency to resist boundaries to a certain degree. But often we fail to see who we really are until God confronts us with the truth. The Bible gives us a good example in **2. Samuel 12:1–7,13**. One year after committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband, David still has not repented from his sin. God has to send the prophet Nathan to confront him with a story. But although David burns in anger against the man described in this story, he fails to recognize himself in it. Nathan has to spell it out for him: "You are the man", to make him see the truth and repent.

Like David, we may not recognize who we are when we read the above descriptions of boundary lovers and boundary busters. We see the failings of others but not our

own weaknesses. Before we read on, we should therefore may evaluate yourself by answering the following questions.

- *How open are you and your spouse to feedback and truth about yourself?*  
(Support your answer with concrete evidence from your life).
- *Which of the character traits of boundary lovers do you have for sure?*  
(You need to grow in the others)
- *Which of the character traits of boundary busters are you sure not to have?*  
(You need to overcome in the others)
- *Do you worry more about the failings of your spouse than about your own need to grow?* (You may have a plank problem).

Our answers to these questions may help us identify the areas in which we still need to grow. They may also reveal that our spouses have fewer flaws than we assume and point to areas where we shouldn't experience difficulties with them.

Seeing the truth about ourselves may be a painful experience. But if we are willing to accept this truth and truly repentant, then we are no longer the obstacle to resolving a conflict but have become a part of its solution.

## 11.2 Resolving conflicts with a boundary-loving spouse

Now that we know a bit more about our own and our spouse's willingness to establish and accept boundaries and to endure the pain that sometimes is involved in the growth process, we can look at ways for resolving conflicts in our relationships.

Let us deal with the easy case first – both you and your spouse are boundary lovers. You are aware that you still miss some of the character traits of boundary lovers and that you need improvement. But you do have an attitude of openness and a desire for both of you to experience freedom and love.

If this is the case, you only have one problem to deal with, when a conflict arises between you, as you are able to talk through problems and help each other. The good news in this case is that conflict isn't a bad problem either. In fact, conflict is normal, whenever two people are close to each other. It is part of the growth process: two things come together that are opposed to each other and don't immediately agree. And because of this, both have to be refined until a working compromise has been found (**Proverbs 27:17**). If you both realize that, working through a conflict can actually be fun. That doesn't mean it's always easy – but you both see the benefits that lie ahead.

In the previous chapters we have discussed specific ways to address the most common kinds of conflicts. In all these suggestions one can see a general pattern for dealing with conflicts, which gives us a biblical strategy for resolving all kinds of conflicts, provided both of us are willing to set and receive boundaries.

### 11.2.1 Observation

Obviously, you can't fix a problem that you don't see. One of you has to notice the problem and identify it as such. If both of you have God's word dwell in your hearts, you will be able to detect problems and conflicts before they grow into something huge.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom (**Colossians 3:16a**).

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (**Hebrews 4:12**).

Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (**Psalms 119:105**).

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (**2. Timothy 3:16**).

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever (**Isaiah 40:8**).

Living in God's word helps you discern good from bad, real problems from imagined ones, beneficial things from desires that hurt your relationship, and sin from behavior that only disturb our own ways.

### 11.2.2 Confrontation

Problems usually don't go away by themselves, and you cannot fix them without talking about them. You will not resolve a problem just by wishful thinking. Instead, you have to take action and speak to the issue. If you recognize a problem, you need to speak honestly with your spouse about it.

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another (**Ephesians 4:25**).

If the problem is a sin, you need to confront it (**Matthew 18:15, Leviticus 19:17b**) without being judgmental or condemning (**Luke 6:37**). If your feelings were hurt, don't become angry but instead let your spouse know how you are feeling (**Ephesians 4:31a**). If your desires are different from those of your spouse, don't hide them but be clear about what you want and that you are willing to find a compromise between the two of you.

Whatever you do to, let your spouse know what the problem is but also make sure you speak the truth *in love*.

### 11.2.3 Ownership

If you are at least part of the problem, don't deny it, but accept your responsibility for it. If you have sinned or hurt your spouse, confess and apologize.

I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin (**Psalms 38:18**).

Therefore confess your sins to one another (**James 5:16a**).

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

If you are the one who has been hurt, own your hurt, communicate it, but be ready to forgive – that is your responsibility.

Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him. (**Luke 17:3–4**).

If you are confronted with a weakness or a problem within yourself, don't blame others, but accept it as yours – only you can work on it

He who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray. (**Proverbs 10:17**).

He who ignores instruction despises himself, but he who heeds admonition gains understanding. (**Proverbs 15:32**).

### 11.2.4 Repentance

Once you have seen your part in the problem, realize that there is a need for a change of direction. Repent – change your mind about how to handle things and commit to resolving the issue. Deal with the sin that has been addressed. Take steps to overcome your weaknesses that put a strain on your relationship. Ask a friend to be an accountability partner for you. Allow your spouse to disagree with you and learn to find compromises. Invest into your relationship by postponing gratification. Submit to your spouse – cheerfully, not grudgingly.

Whatever the conflict is, it points at a situation, behavior, or attitude that requires change. Don't continue as before but find out where change is required and commit to it – fully, not just a little bit.

### 11.2.5 Involvement in the growth process

Problems usually do not go away immediately. Even if you are committed to change everything, you will notice that old habits are difficult to break. Change doesn't come overnight but is the result of a process that may take days, weeks, and sometimes even years. If you want to see growth, you must commit to going through the whole process and to using the resources that are necessary or helpful to making you succeed.



Don't give up if success doesn't come early. Accept outside help, maybe counseling, support groups, or some other form of structured help. Work on the issue together with your spouse.

And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (**Ecclesiastes 4:12**).

Whatever it is that you need to work on, commit to the process that is necessary and stay involved in it. It is for your own growth and the benefit of your relationship.

#### **11.2.6 Reexamination**

If you have solved the problem, do not assume it is gone forever.

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. (**Matthew 12:43–45**)

It is not enough to focus on removing a problem. We have to fill the void that is created, since otherwise we become vulnerable for all kinds of new problems. Agree on a follow-up plan that prevents the problem from coming back. Get a regular check-up from others to whom you have made yourself accountable. Allow your spouse to confront you if a sin or weakness re-occurs. Whatever the problem was, make sure that early warning symptoms are not being ignored, but give yourself and your spouse enough grace that you do not start controlling each other.

Become proactive! Let new good habits take the place of old bad ones. Learn to address hurt feelings early enough to prevent them from growing into resentment and anger. Replace criticism by words of thanks and after a while even critical thoughts will disappear. Learn to apologize immediately and you will become more open to confrontation. Learn to bring everything before God together and you will see differences in an entirely new light.

#### **11.2.7 Communication**

If both you and your spouse are boundary lovers, you are open to truth, responsibility, freedom, and love. Because of that, God will help you to find these things. Remember, however, that conflict can still be painful even for you. Negative things happen in all relationships and they do hurt. And it is not always easy to communicate this hurt without making it sound like an accusation. But there are some basic guidelines for communication that help keeping a discussion from turning into a severe argument.

1. *Listen and seek to understand* your spouse before seeking to be understood (**James 1:19, 1. Peter 3:8–9,17, 1. Corinthians 13:4–5**). Try to understand what your spouse is feeling, wanting, and desiring. That may require suppressing the urge to reply to everything you hear right away. Be patient. Your spouse may need some time to express himself – if you interrupt, you will miss out on some very valuable information.
2. *Use reflective listening* to make your spouse know that you understand. Active listening confirms to the other that you have understood what he was saying and that you his feelings serious.
3. *Never ever devalue or explain away* what your spouse is feeling or saying. Even if it is difficult to let negative statements stand for a while – do not defend yourself or others right away. Just listen and make sure you understand the whole picture. You can voice your opinion later.
4. *Clarify* to make sure that you understand. Don't jump to conclusions if what you hear is unfamiliar to you. Ask questions to fill in details that help you understand what your spouse really tries to tell you.
5. *Use "I" statements* to express that you are taking responsibility for what you feel or want. "You" statements often come across as blaming, which closes the communication channel between you and your spouse. If you want to communicate is what is going on inside you, stick to exactly that and avoid voicing opinions about your spouse's character.
6. *Expect your spouse to do the same*. If both of you commit to following the basic rules of communication, there is a good chance that you will understand each other much better.
7. Last, but not least, *check your own attitude towards your spouse*. Do you make yourself attractive to your husband by working on your inner beauty and character (**1. Peter 3:1–5**) or do you only care for the outside? The latter is worthless without the former, but not the other way around (**Proverbs 11:22, 31:30**). In the same way, do you treat your wife with love and respect (**1. Peter 3:7, Ephesians 5:33**)? Understanding can only grow in an environment of respect. Otherwise all communication is meaningless.

Do not be afraid of conflict. Conflict is necessary to initiate growth (**Romans 5:3–5, James 1:2–3**) and results in deeper intimacy if you go through it lovingly.

### 11.3 Boundaries aren't always welcome

Resolving conflicts, as we have seen, can be easy if both partners are willing to establish and accept boundaries and to endure the painful discipline that is necessary to overcome difficulties. It becomes more difficult, however, if one mate's reaction to

an appropriate limit goes from an “I don’t really like this” to an “I won’t accept this”. This is not a natural reaction to pain anymore but a value statement – avoiding pain has priority over personal growth and solving the real problem together – that says much about the character of the person.

Nobody really likes pain. But a person of good character looks beyond the immediate pain and welcomes it as necessary component of spiritual and emotional growth (recall **Hebrews 12:11**). A person with a problem character, however, refuses to accept that he sometimes needs correction and limits. He isn’t willing to carry his load and rather invests all his energy into attacking the limitations set before him – and, sadly enough, also his spouse who is trying to set them (recall **Proverbs 9:8**) – than into addressing the problem that he should really be dealt with.

Unfortunately, many relationships are “mixed” with respect to the spouse’s views of boundaries. One spouse has learned to accept necessary limitations and puts a high priority on personal growth, out of love for God and his spouse. But the other one does not seem to be interested in disciplining herself or in respecting his boundaries. As a result, the relationship becomes very unbalanced: one spouse has too much responsibility and the other one too little. And the boundary busting partner refuses to work on her own character but rather expects her spouse to change. There is no more growth in the relationship and the problems between the two grow.

What can you do if you find yourself in such a situation? Is there still hope that your relationship will turn into the one that you always desired to have? A relationship that is dominated by mutual love, appreciation, and respect?

I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain “move from here to there” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. (**Matthew 17:20**)

No matter what your situation is – there is always hope. If you have faith in God, trust in his word, and do what it says (**James 1:22**), then every problem can be overcome with patience and endurance. It doesn’t matter if your faith is small – the only thing that counts is in whom you have faith.

But here is the bad news – it’s going to be hard work. No matter on which side of the unbalanced relationship you are, *you* are the one who needs to deal with it. And that is not going to be easy. Actually, it is not even easy to teach this, because we have to talk about a variety of unpleasant issues to get at the root of the problem.

If you are the one who uses to resist boundaries, you have some hard character work to do. If you want your relationship to improve, you need to examine and very likely to adjust your priorities, because they are certainly out of balance. If love of God and your spouse, compassion and forgiveness, honesty and truth, faithfulness, and holiness do not rank highly in your personal values, then your wish for a deep and loving relationship will remain . . . just a wish, nothing more, because *what you value is what you get*. In other words, if you value other things higher than love, then you

can't expect to find true love in your relationship. You may find these other things, but you will also realize that they don't really fulfill you.

But – if you have realized that you are the boundary buster in your relationship you have gone the first important step – you have faced your own reality and accepted the pain that comes with seeing who you really are. There are two ways to deal with that pain – you try to make it easier by forgetting what you have seen and end up with the same problems as before, still knowing in the back of your mind that you are causing many of them. Or you can repent, go back to the chapter on values (Chapter 8), and commit to making a major adjustment in your priorities. Remember, nothing will be impossible for you if you submit to God's way of making you grow up. And your spouse is your ally – not your enemy – when he sets unpleasant, but necessary boundaries before you.

The following discussions may help you gain some insights into your character and show you possible causes for your behavior and weaknesses that you may have to address. However, from now on we will describe everything as if talking to the one who has to deal with a boundary resistant partner and is willing to go the necessary steps.

If you are the partner who is willing to accept discipline and limitations and to endure the pain that sometimes comes with the growth process, but – after a careful and honest examination – have to realize that your spouse does not see these things the same way you do, you have a lot of work before you. You can't make your spouse grow up against her will. You only can work on yourself and do everything in your power to make your relationship grow – and that without expecting too much cooperation from your spouse, at least not initially. But again, nothing will be impossible if you submit to God's way of doing things. The steps you have to go may be difficult and unpleasant, because at times you have to be very firm with your spouse and ask yourself if you're doing the right thing, but if you follow God's path, you will eventually see the positive results of your efforts.

### **11.3.1 Distinguish between ignorance and selfishness**

First of all, you have to make sure that the symptoms you observe in your spouse really point at a character issue and not just at ignorance. Your spouse may simply not be aware that he is overstepping your boundaries and that his behavior is hurtful or irritating to you. Ignorance is not the same as selfishness.

There is an easy way to find out. When confronted with the issue, the ignorant spouse will often respond positively, while a truly boundary-resistant spouse will react defensively. If your spouse was ignorant about the consequences of his behavior, he will feel deep remorse for causing you pain and will change his behavior or attitude quickly out of love for you.

The difficulty with ignorance, however, is that your spouse is really not aware of the pain he causes even if that may be extremely obvious to others. Therefore it is not

helpful to try to convince him that he is doing something wrong – he doesn't see it that way or he would do otherwise. Instead, let him know how you feel when he violates your boundaries and what it is that hurts you.

Remember, that love always hopes and believes (**1. Corinthians 13:7**). Approach conflicts with your spouse first as if they were ignorance issues, not character problems. You will find out quickly whether you are right or not (**Proverbs 9:8, 13:1, 15:5**). If you are, your spouse will love you for gently making him aware of his failings and make the necessary changes. If he resists, you will know that you have to deal with a much bigger problem first.

### 11.3.2 How the boundary buster sees the issue

One of the greatest problems in a “boundary-mixed” relation is that the boundary loving partner does not understand the perspective of the boundary resistant one. He cannot comprehend how people can put such a low priority on inner values such as love, compassion, forgiveness, honesty, faithfulness, and holiness, and is not willing to grow in these areas if that requires discipline and self-limitation in other areas. He is often surprised or even shocked to learn how different his own spouse thinks and feels about this matter. Understanding the viewpoint of your boundary-resistant spouse will help you go the right steps and avoid mistakes in the process.

One of the key attitudes of people who don't respect other's boundaries is that they *should be able to do what they want*. They see ultimate freedom as their right that should not be restricted by anyone. Like Adam and Eve and millions of people after them, they refuse to accept that they are creatures with limitations and restrictions and not God the creator himself. They feel entitled to a richly blessed life without trials and difficulties and complain whenever this is not so. They want to tell God what he needs to do for them instead of accepting the the path that he sets before them. All this is an attitude that one would expect only in small children, hoping that they will mature out of it as they grow up (**1. Corinthians 13:11**). However, this doesn't always happen and even Christians can be very immature (**1. Corinthians 3:1–3, 14:20**).

It is important to realize this doesn't mean that the boundary resistant partner is a bad person otherwise. In fact, your spouse may be a wonderful and loving person under normal circumstances, who feels genuinely drawn to you and cares deeply for you. For the people around you there is often not the slightest hint that there are problems between the two of you. But whenever boundary issues arise, she doesn't act like a mature person anymore: the good feelings for you are gone and anger, guilt messages, or acting out take their place.

The boundary-resistant spouse reacts this way because his thoughts and feelings center around what he *wants* and not around what his responsibilities are. As a result, he feels that the limit you try to establish is unfair. In fact, he sees any limit on his

freedom as unreasonable and hurtful. How can anyone be so mean to say no to him in areas that are so important to him? He feels that the request to limit himself for the sake of growth in the relationship means that his spouse doesn't love him anymore. When you have to deal with a boundary-resistant spouse, keep in mind that he feels that he should be able to do what he wants. As long as he has not grown out of this childish attitude, he will challenge and protest any boundary that you set before him, because boundaries say that *you cannot do what you want all the time*. Since you have to expect a lot of resistance, you have to be sure that the boundaries you are trying to establish are appropriate. Otherwise you will find it very difficult not to give in to the complaints and protests.

### 11.3.3 Your own life needs scrutiny as well

Before you look for ways how to deal with your boundary-resistant spouse, make sure that you deal with the planks in your own eye (**Matthew 7:5**). The fact that your spouse is a boundary buster, who sometimes behaves immature or even childish, doesn't make her any worse a person than you are. She only has the more obvious problems while you look very innocent in comparison. Beware of becoming judgmental and condemning when you figure this out and try to be merciful and forgiving not just in what you say and do but also in your thoughts (**Luke 6:37, James 2:12-13**). Remember that you are a sinner too and have much to repent of. Here is a small list of "planks" that partners of boundary-resistant spouses should examine before looking at the flaws of their spouse.

- Pretending that everything is all right
- Not speaking the truth (**Ephesians 4:25**)
- Withdrawing instead of confronting the issues
- Not following up with consequences
- Nagging
- Being passively revengeful
- Being self-righteous and condemning (**Luke 18:10–14**)
- Gossiping about your spouse instead of telling him your feelings

Make sure that you deal with these problems in yourself first. As you grow in these areas, you become a more lovable person who is more firmly rooted in her faith. If your spouse becomes aware of that, he may let go of his resistance to the boundaries you are trying to set. But even if he doesn't, your basis for the steps that you need to go has become much stronger.

## 11.4 Causes for Boundary Resistance

Dealing with boundary resistant people can be very difficult, as their attitude towards self-discipline and limitations is not what one would expect from a mature adult. There may be a variety of reasons for that. These reasons cannot be taken as excuses, but understanding them will help you find the right way to approach the issues with your boundary resistant spouse.

### 11.4.1 Empathic failure

To accept boundaries, a person must be able to see the effects of his actions on others. If we fail others, we should feel godly sorrow (**2. Corinthians 7:10**) and compassion for the hurt we cause them. As a consequence we try to treat those we love as we would like to be treated by them (**Matthew 7:12**).

However, some people have difficulty becoming aware of their effect on people. They may do all the right things but they can't sense the feelings of others. A wife may tell her husband how tough some his behavior is for her and he simply doesn't understand what her problem is. Like Mr. Spock of the old *Star Trek* series, he may be mystified by her "irrational" feelings.

People who struggle with understanding feelings often appear detached, arrogant, and self-absorbed. Fortunately, this is usually not the case. Opening up the world of emotions and relationships to such a spouse may be very helpful.

Although your emotions are very plain to you, you may have to explain them to him, if you want him to grasp what is going on inside you. For instance, saying "I hate it that you spend so much time on the computer" may leave him totally clueless while telling him "I feel lonely, when you go straight to the computer when you come home", can be an eye-opener for him. For you, both statements may mean the same. But in the first statement you only show him the aggressive outside of your emotions and pushed him away from you, while the second statement shows him your vulnerable inside and asked for his compassion.

In the same way, you can help him learn to open his own feelings to you and connect in vulnerable ways to you. For instance, in a situation that would make you feel hurt and angry, you may invite him to confess his pain by letting him know how you would feel and asking him how he felt about it. Don't press it, but if he does open up, make sure that you are compassionate with the emotions he shares – even if they are very different from yours. Otherwise you only strengthen his belief that emotions are irrational experiences that should not be shared.

### 11.4.2 Irresponsibility

Some spouses clearly sense the effects of their actions on others but have a low sense of ownership for them. Like a small child, they feel that they should be able to do

what they want and do not feel responsible for the consequences. They don't see their life as their own problem – it is someone else's.

Ever since the fall, humans have struggled with this character issue: “This wasn't my fault – someone else is responsible” (**Genesis 3:12–13**). No one takes responsibility for his life gracefully – it has to be built by many painful experiences (**Romans 5:3–5, James 1:2–3**). But some people have escaped the hard lessons of life because they always found somebody else to rescue them. They always blame others for what happens to them and they seem unable to learn from failure. A husband who has problems with his temper may blame others for making him angry. A wife who overspends may complain that she just does not enough money. A spouse who is chronically late may always have the excuse that other people kept him from coming on time.

There are many excuses for irresponsibility. However, behind every irresponsible spouse there is a safety net – either in the past or in the present. As long as this safety net is allowed to remain, such a person will hardly change his attitude – why should he? To make your spouse see that *he*, not others, is the major cause for his problems, you need to surround him with supportive, but firm people to teach him ownership and self-control. These people may be a friends, a support group, or a Bible study. Don't try to do this alone – if you have enabled him before, chances are that you will do it again in the future.

#### 11.4.3 Inability to stay free when receiving limits

Some spouses may be unable to accept confrontation and consequences because they have a split in their soul: freedom, love, and submission are concepts that they cannot see integrated. When a husband asks his wife to limit herself for the sake of a common future goal, she may feel that her freedom is at risk if she submits to his request. Giving up even a bit of her freedom makes her feel helpless and vulnerable, so she rebels against the proposed limitations and becomes angry at him.

Quite often, such a spouse comes from an enmeshing family, she had to struggle greatly to be able to make her own decisions and choices. Disagreement was not welcome at home and usually led to withdrawal of love or other forms of “punishment”. As a consequence, she has never learned to accept limits out of *her own choice*. For her, any disagreement feels like an offense; limits and submission are a matter of control and not an issue of love (**Ephesians 5:21**). So when her husband asks her to limit herself, she feels that he is trying to control her and reacts against him.

Such spouses need help in preserving their freedom and choices while freely choosing to respond to limits without jeopardizing that freedom. Let your spouse know that you want her to be free to disagree and to say no to you, but that you also want the freedom to express your requests without her blowing up at you.



#### 11.4.4 Desire to be in control

Some people have grown up believing that there can only be one way to do things right and that they know what the right way is. They are unable to see their spouse as having separate and equal feelings and ideas. Instead of mutually solving problems, they negate the freedom of their spouse to be different and often come across as controlling, manipulating, or dominating their partners.

Common examples are the husband, who threatens his wife when she disagrees. He directly assaults her freedom, intending to make her comply and submit to his opinion or desires, and even quotes Ephesians 5:22 to justify this demand. All this reduces a loving connection between the two to a fear-based dominance. Another example would be the wife who uses guilt messages to assault boundaries. When her husband wants her to become responsible and stops enabling her, she blames him for being distant and unloving.

Spouses who try to control others either aggressively or through manipulation need to learn that their lack of responsibility hurts them even more than others. Controlling people have lost their freedom, because they have become dependent on the compliance of others. Usually they feel miserable if this does not happen. To overcome their controlling attitude, they need your love, confrontation with the truth (**John 8:32**), consequences, and maybe even the intervention of others to see that their behavior is destructive and must change.

#### 11.4.5 Denial of imperfection

Some people can admit that their way is not the only way but refuse to admit weaknesses and faults. They desire not to be seen as “wrong” or “bad” and often react defensively to correction’. When their spouse confronts them about a certain issue, they deny the offense (“*I never do that*”), rationalize or minimize it (“*you’re overreacting*”), blame their spouse (“*you made me do this*”), reverse the issue (“*you do the same*”), or try other ways to avoid owning their fault.

There may be several reasons why people cannot admit weaknesses and faults. They may have a judgmental attitude and try to escape from their own a harsh and condemning conscience that results from that (**Luke 6:37**). They may be unable to grasp their own sinfulness (**Matthew 15:19, Psalm 14:3, Genesis 8:21**) and try to protect their “good self”. Or they may have a deep sense of entitlement not to be challenged. Whatever the reason, they avoid taking responsibility of their own badness and feel wronged by any form of correction.

Spouses who deny imperfection are still like children who have not yet learned from the pain they experience when crossing a boundary. Instead of recognizing that the boundary is necessary and that they are the ones who are wrong, they feel treated unfairly. They are unaware of how hurtful their boundary-crossing can be.

Spouses with this problem need two things. They need consequences when they hurt

others, to become aware of their faults; and they need a safe way to explore their own bad parts, to admit weaknesses and faults, and to experience forgiveness.

#### 11.4.6 Retaliation

Some marriages are troubled by a spouse who has the urge to retaliate whenever he feels wronged. Instead of forgiving the perceived (or real) transgression, he takes an eye for an eye (**Exodus 21:24**), believing that he has the right to do so, and often even escalates the wrongdoing. This attitude can create tremendous problems in a relationship.

The most common form of retaliation takes place whenever a couple has an argument. One (perceived) insult leads to another and a minor issue suddenly turns into a major fight. Fortunately, most couples realize quickly what they are doing, stop the escalation, and apologize. Sometimes, however, one spouse lets the situation escalate and major damage is done before the argument finally ends. Many cases of domestic violence are the result of escalating retaliation.

Similarly, irresponsibility can escalate. A husband may retaliate for his spouse's uncontrolled spending by buying expensive things that the family cannot afford. A wife may punish her husband for always being late for dinner by becoming tardy herself. All these are ungodly reactions to hurt. Whether the transgression is real or not, revenge is not an option. You may feel justifiably hurt and angry about your spouse's behavior. Yet, avenging yourself is sin. Revenge belongs to God, not to you (**Deuteronomy 32:35**). Take your hurt to God and let him heal it (possibly with the help of other people) and then learn to solve the problem that caused it.

#### 11.4.7 Transference

Sometimes the intimacy of a close relationship can revive old, unresolved feelings about other relationships with parents, siblings, close friends, or other people. A spouse may suddenly have feelings towards her partner that are about someone else, not about him.

For example, a wife may feel reminded of her critical and controlling father whenever her husband is trying to bring up an issue between them. As a consequence she feels that he is trying to control her and reacts negatively. But in reality, her negative feelings are not about her husband or about the boundary he is trying to establish but projections of her negative feelings towards her father that are still in her heart. People who experience this confusing state of *transference* usually get along very well with their spouses as long as no conflicts are being brought up and often it takes quite some time to find out why resolving conflicts is so difficult for them. To overcome this problem they need to work through their feelings towards significant other people and learn to forgive things that have happened in the past, so that they can't burden them anymore in the present.

#### 11.4.8 Resistance in specific contexts

Some spouses are correctable, responsible, empathic, and respectful to boundaries in all areas but one. There is only one “pocket area” – time, money, in-laws, communication, sex, or parenting, etc. – that becomes a no-man’s land for conflicts. Whenever an issue is brought up in this area, it tends to bring out emotional outbreaks and fights, but conflict itself remains unresolved. Over the time the couple learns to skirt around the problem area. But nevertheless it causes a certain distance in an otherwise loving relationship.

There may be several reasons for such a situation.

- *Lack of experience:* A spouse may simply have no clue how this area affects the other person.
- *Past hurts:* A spouse may have had very negative experience in this area and therefore reacts much stronger.
- *Hidden character issues:* A spouse may have a deeper character problem that can be controlled in most areas and becomes visible only in a few situations.

Whatever the cause, the presenting problem is rarely the real one, but more likely the fruit of it (**Matthew 7:17–20, Mark 7:23**). A couple may have to look more deeply into their relationship and the hearts of both spouses, and ask God to reveal their hidden faults to them (**Psalm 19:12**).

Understanding the reasons why you or your spouse have problems with self-discipline and limitations, will help you find the right way to approach the issues that you need to resolve. Your spouse hardly resists your boundaries out of evil intentions. But he does have some character problems that need to be worked on. He must learn to accept boundaries and limitations as something positive for his personal growth and the growth of the relationship. Although he has to do the character work mostly by himself, he probably will not do so unless you help him get started.

#### 11.5 Resolving conflicts with a boundary-resistant spouse

Now that we understand some reasons why our spouses resists, ignores, or minimizes our boundaries although they are aware of our feelings and concerns, we have to ask ourselves what we can do about it. The situation is difficult, because our spouses will very likely not cooperate. On the contrary, we have to expect that they will attack our boundaries and try to resist every change that we are trying to introduce. They may start arguments, have tantrums, and even hate us (**Proverbs 9:8a**) for introducing the world of boundaries to them. Sometimes they let the situation escalate and we will ask ourselves if trying to establish boundaries is really the right thing, and more than once we are tempted to give in – only to find out again that this doesn’t improve the situation at all.

Dealing with such issues will be very hard work, but probably also the most productive thing that you will ever do for your marriage. The situation is not hopeless (recall **Matthew 17:20**). Although you can't approach it as if you and your spouse were a team, you are certainly not alone. You have God, and you hopefully have friends who support you.

In this section we want to discuss ways to deal with a boundary-resistant spouse in a caring, yet truthful manner.

### 11.5.1 Things to avoid

Before considering concrete steps to resolve boundary issues with your spouse, you should become aware of the things that will not help but only make the situation worse. Here is a small list of things that you should not do.

- *Don't deny or minimize the situation.* Hiding from a significant problem does not change reality.
- *Don't ignore the problem,* hoping the situation will improve by itself. Time alone does not solve character issues. They need to be worked on.
- *Don't become more compliant or pleasing.* Although love is patient and kind (**1. Corinthians 13:4**), it does not enable evil (**1. Corinthians 13:6a**). Character issues demand not only love, but also firmness. Consider the example of Jesus: although he was the most loving person ever to live on earth, he could be very firm when it came to addressing significant problems (**John 2:13–16, 4:16–18, Matthew 23:13–36**).
- *Don't be constantly surprised at your spouse's behavior.* Boundary-resistant people have no reason to change as long as it is more comfortable for them to stay as they are. Don't expect any changes within your relationship until you initiate them yourself.
- *Don't nag.* Repeating the same protest over and over again will not change your spouse's attitude but only drive him away further (**Proverbs 21:9, 21:19, 25:24, 27:15**).
- *Don't even think of blaming your spouse,* thinking that she is “your biggest problem”. As long as you believe this, you will be guaranteed only more misery. Very few marriage problems involve one all-innocent and one all-guilty party. As long as you don't take ownership of your part of the problem, you're not ready to resolve the real issue (**Matthew 7:5**).
- *Don't try to solve the problems of your spouse.* They are not yours, so you shouldn't take total ownership for them and rescue your partner from his part (**Proverbs 19:19**).

- *Don't try to solve the problem all by yourself.* As long as you are on your own you may easily be overwhelmed by the problem and not be able to recover (**Ecclesiastes 4:10b, 4:12a**).
- *Don't address all issues at once.* It is very discouraging for anyone to learn that everything is wrong with him. Why should he even try to change if you don't believe he is any good at all? Instead of giving your spouse a huge list of problems all at once, bring them up one at a time, starting with the really important ones.
- *Don't give up* (**1. Corinthians 13:7-8a**).

### 11.5.2 Preparation

Dealing with a boundary-resistant spouse can be hard work, which requires you to avoid certain reactions that may come naturally but only make things worse. What then, can you do to resolve issues with your spouse while approaching her with grace and truth?

Two aspects are important: creating an environment that makes it easier for you to successfully deal with the issues at stake, and the actual confrontation during which you request change, establish boundaries, and follow through with consequences. Although the actual character work has to be done by your spouse, these steps will help her get started.

**Establishing soul connections with God and other people** is one of the most important things for any Christian (**Proverbs 17:17, 18:24, 27:6, James 2:23**), but it is even more important when you face conflicts with your spouse. You will encounter plenty of conflict when you try to address issues with a boundary-resistant partner. Your spouse will test your limits, become angry, withdraw, try to make you feel guilty, or punish your attempts to establish limits with extreme reactions. All this will threaten the closeness between the two of you.

If the only deep connection residing in your soul is your spouse, the chances for real progress are very low. When your spouse withdraws love, you will feel lonely and loveless; and you may be tempted to comply only to stay connected. Therefore you need to establish healthy, safe, and honest soul connections with God and other people before you attempt a confrontation with your spouse. Friends are a resource for comfort, encouragement, strength, and accountability during the stress of conflict resolution in your marriage (**recall Ecclesiastes 4:9–12**). And a deep and trusting relationship between you and God can carry you through difficult times (**Psalms 23**).

**Work on your spiritual and emotional growth.** Obviously, you should not establish a deep soul connection only to become strong enough to set limits in your marriage. God wants you to use these relationship as a means to grow spiritually and emotionally.

Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up in him who is the head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds himself up in love as each part does its work (**Ephesians 4:15–16**).

As you open up to Him and other people, you will deal with old hurts and failures, become more honest, able to forgive and let go. While you try to help a difficult spouse learn about love and responsibility, you will grow in these capacities yourself. Many things can happen that help you prepare for addressing the issues with your spouse. You may discover why your spouse has this particular issue. You may realize why you had difficulties establishing and keeping limits. You may find out that you are guilty of one or several of the “don’t do” items above and learn how to correct this. You may learn how to confront issues without making the person feel attacked. Most of all you may learn how to receive love and support when you fail and need encouragement and feedback.

**Identify the specific issue.** Once you have established deep relationships with God and other people and begun your personal growth process, you will need to find out what the specific issues are between you and your spouse. This involves several aspects and you should ask yourself the following questions.

- What boundary is being violated?
- How does it affect you and your love for your spouse? Do you feel hurt and distant from your spouse?
- Is the problem an occasional event or a regular pattern?
- Does the problem require a change in behavior or a change in character?
- Is it important enough for you to risk a conflict over it?

Particularly the last question is difficult to answer, since you have to weigh your desire for peace in your relationship against the damage that is created by not dealing with the issue. You need to keep a cool head and focus on the most important issues first, addressing them one at a time. If you try to address everything at once, your spouse may feel overwhelmed by your expectations and not even try to start the necessary character work.

In general, it is better to request the deeper attitude changes first. A specific behavior is only a symptom that shows what is going on in person’s heart (**Matthew 15:19**), so solving the character issues helps changing the outward behavior.

Also, asking for internal changes helps you learn about your spouses true attitude towards boundaries. If she is boundary-friendly, she will want to change and may request your help. If she is boundary-resistant, she will deny, become angry, rationalize, or blame – in short, negate your request. This is the nature of resistance: an opposition to owning an issue.

Sometimes, your spouse's resistance to your request for internal changes requires you to deal with specific behavioral issues first and then come back to the more important issues after you have made progress in the other ones.

**Validate your spouse.** Before you can ask your spouse to make changes you have to convince her that you understand her perspective and that you always have her best interests in mind. Nobody likes having to make character changes in the first place, but it becomes even more difficult if she has the feeling that you don't respect her point of view and the efforts she is making. She would feel misunderstood and criticized without being heard. If this is the case all your requests just come across as attempts to control her and it is unlikely that you will receive a positive response.

In everything do to others what you would have them do to you (**Matthew 7:12**).

Think about how you want to be approached if your spouse wants you to change your behavior. Wouldn't it be much easier to do if she appreciates that you are trying your best, although you make mistakes, and expresses that you are important to her?

In **Revelation 2:2–5** God gives us a wonderful example how to soften the burden of change. First, he validates the hard work and perseverance of the church in Ephesus. He lets the church know how much he appreciates their efforts. Yet he also requests change. But he only addresses the issue after letting the church know that they are valuable to him. And he expresses his appreciation again after having corrected their mistake.

The more difficult the problem is that you are trying to resolve with your spouse, the more important it is to validate and encourage her. Validation involves several dimensions:

- You express that her feelings are important to you. What is her perspective of the problem and how does she feel about the conflict?
- You want to understand her point of view. Does she believe you're overreacting when you want to see change and that it is really not that bad? If she senses that you respect her view (even if you don't agree) it is easier to negotiate a solution.
- You respond to what is actually true about her view. Maybe she is right in saying that you haven't said anything about the issue for weeks and suddenly demand an immediate change. Admitting that you made mistakes in the way you approached her does not make your request less valid. In fact, it will probably make her aware that you do are not her adversary but that you actually listen to what she says. So even if it appears like a diversion to the real issue, accept it and admit your mistakes. That way you will deal with the "diversion" much quicker. On the other hand, when you deny that she has got a point here, you will probably start a long discussion and never get to the real issue.

Validating your spouse is not easy, particularly when she constantly resists boundaries that are important to you. But you will experience little progress if she doesn't believe you can't convince her.

**Love is the goal.** The purpose of resolving conflicts is not to win an argument, but to be closer to your spouse. Boundaries are about protecting love, not about showing people their evil ways and forcing them to change. You are not the judge of your spouse but his partner and he needs to understand that your prime motive for requesting change is enhancing or even repairing the loving feeling between you. If your partner feels that you attack his person instead of an issue, that you make him the bad guy, condemn him, or punish him, then there is little chance that he will really make the changes you desire. Maybe he changes something on the outside, but his character won't change.

Dear friends, let us love one another for love comes from God. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. **(1. John 4:7, 16b–18).**

Love comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith **(1. Timothy 1:5).**

Help him see that you need and love him, and that the boundary issue is an obstacle to the love you desire to give and receive. For instance, when you tell him that his chronic lateness distances you, you should also say that you want to solve this because you want to be close again. When you let him know that you can't feel love when he dismisses your feelings, tell him that you desire to feel love. Let him know that you don't want to control or criticize him but that you are trying to solve a problem so that love can reign. Show him that your goal is love and that you value the connection between you above all.

**Earn the right to require change.** The most difficult aspect of resolving conflicts is that you have to earn the right to require your spouse to change. Ask God to search your heart **(Psalm 139:23–24)** and to reveal to you where you are contributing to the problem and then make all the necessary changes. This way you create a level playing field: your spouse sees that you do not try to remove a speck from his eye while leaving the plank in yours **(Matthew 7:3–5)** but that you actually do your share. Even if your spouse is the main cause of the problem and your contribution to it appears minimal, you should never appear as setting yourself up as the perfect person who has the right to judge her partner. That destroys his motivation to change and is wrong before God: we don't have the right to judge each other.



The hard news is that you should make your changes regardless of your spouse's willingness to make the changes that he should do. That may sound unfair, but it is one of the most important realities in life. Do not depend on our spouse's behavior, but do what is right and helps you grow. Whether your spouse grows as well or not must not influence your personal growth.

For instance, your husband may be a very dominant person while you have a tendency to comply and withdraw. Obviously it would be easier for you to be more assertive if he would be less bossy. And he may be kinder if you learn to be more up front. But the fact is that you have a problem that you need to work on: your tendency to withdraw. It is your responsibility to God to change that, no matter what your husband does. Your growth is between you and God alone.

### **11.5.3 Confrontation**

Once you have learned to keep the above elements in mind whenever you approach your spouse, you are ready to deal with the issue.

#### **Request specific change.**

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over (**Matthew 18:15**).

You can't expect change if you don't confront your spouse and request change. But when you bring up the issues, be clear and specific. Your spouse needs to know to know exactly what you are expected from him. By being clear about that you have transferred some of the responsibility for dealing with the problem to him.

#### **Where there is no law, there is no transgression (**Romans 4:15**)**

When you talk to your spouse, stick to clearly identifiable issues. It is your responsibility to let him know what you want him to do. Avoid generalities, but be specific instead. If you want him to take more initiative in parenting or to take over some of the household chores (now that both of you are working), don't just tell him that you wish that he would be more helpful. If you feel that he belittles you in front of others, don't just say that you want him to be more loving. Changes are very difficult to make if one doesn't know what it is that needs to be changed.

**Allow time to respond.** Once you made your request, you cannot expect change immediately. Maybe it is the first time that you brought up the issue appropriately, and he may not be used to your being honest, direct, and specific about what you don't like in your relationship. So far you have enabled his behavior. Now you are changing the rules and your spouse needs time to make the necessary adjustments. Be patient and allow time to observe his response, evaluate yourself, your spouse, and what happens between you. Things may be easier than you believe, as your clarity and the time to adapt maybe all your spouse needs. If so, you have won him over (**Matthew 18:15**). It is definitely worth waiting a while to find out.

**Establish appropriate consequences.** Stating your request and allowing time, however, may not be enough. Ever since the fall, people have known the rules and still crossed the line (**Genesis 3:6**), as the benefits of doing so were appealing for some reason or the other. In the same way, the benefits that your spouse receives when violating your boundaries may far outweigh the value that your appeals and requests have for him. If this is the case, you *need* to set consequences.

What does that mean? Consequences are the “natural” effects of some act, like falling down when you jump out of a window. You need to establish some consequence for your spouse’s transgression so that he will experience some discomfort for his irresponsibility. For instance, you may leave the room or even the house for a period of time until your spouse ceases his temper tantrums. You may open separate accounts if your spouse doesn’t quit overspending, so that some base amount of money is safe. You may leave an event if your spouse doesn’t stop demeaning you in public. You may stop cleaning up after your spouse as long as he continues to be excessively messy. If your spouse has an affair, you may require him to leave the home until the affair is over and counseling has begun.

There are plenty of possible consequences for different boundary violations, but choosing the one that is appropriate for your situation is not easy, since you certainly don’t want to do something that damages your relationship. Here are some guidelines that you need to keep in mind.

- Consequences are there to *protect you*, not to control or change your spouse. They allow appropriate cause and effect, but the your spouse still needs the freedom to choose – even if he chooses to endure the consequences rather than changing his behavior.
- Consequences are *reactions to your spouse’s behavior* not attempts to make him behave in a certain way. This is not in your power, so any consequence of the kind “if you ... then you have to” or “don’t do ... or I will make you” is totally useless.
- Consequences are *deliberate* actions and *never to be set in anger*. They are not about getting even or punishing your spouse but shall help you get out of enabling irresponsibility. Before you set them, think them through in prayer and with friends.
- Consequences should *relate to the nature of the transgression*. It makes sense to leave the room when you spouse has temper tantrums, since no one likes to be around when people are enraged. But it does not make sense to stop doing the laundry for two weeks, as these two things have nothing to do with each other.
- Consequences have to be *appropriately severe* – severe enough to matter but not so severe that they, rather than the behavior you want to address, become the issue. Leaving the room when your spouse becomes enraged during an argument *may* be appropriate – moving out is certainly not. It is the other way around if your spouse becomes physically abusive every time you have an argument.

- Consequences must be *enforceable*. Don't announce consequences that you won't be able to follow through with anyway. If you can't tell the pastor that you have trouble in your marriage, don't threaten to do that. Don't threaten to move out when you don't know where to go. Your spouse will find out quickly that you don't have the power or resources to enforce the consequences and simply ignore your threats.
- Consequences must follow *as immediately as possible*. This is not only important when dealing with children but also with adults. Your spouse must see the link between his action and the consequence. If he becomes enraged during an argument, you need to leave the room right away or not at all. It doesn't make sense thinking about what happened and then start avoiding him the next day when everything is over.
- Consequences must remain *respectful your spouse* (**Ephesians 5:21, 1. Peter 3:1–2,7**). Stay away from humiliating or punitive consequences such as making sarcastic remarks or making fun of his weaknesses. This is retaliation and will certainly not bring the two of you closer together.
- Consequences must be *modified as the situation changes*. If your spouse repents, you can relax the consequences (**2. Corinthians 2:5–8**). However, be sure that the change is genuine has truly occurred of some period of time. A simple "I am sorry" may mean nothing and should not be enough to let go of the consequence right away (contrast **1. Samuel 15:19–26** with **2. Samuel 12:11–14**).

On the other hand, you may have to increase the severity of the consequence if the behavior of your spouse becomes worse (**Matthew 18:15–17**). For instance, you may have to get friends or your pastor involved if the temper tantrums of your spouse grow beyond what you can handle alone.

- Most importantly, consequences *must be announced ahead of time*.

When I say to a wicked man "you will surely die" and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself. (**Ezekiel 3:18–19**, see also the book of **Jonah**)

Never apply consequences without giving appropriate warning. Your spouse must be aware that from now on you will begin to set limits. That gives him a chance to repent before suffering the consequences and demonstrates to him that you don't want to punish him but like to see the problem solved. If you react impulsively or plan your consequence in secret and suddenly come out with a "because you did ... I will now", you exercise punishment instead of giving him a the choice to change.

**Follow through.** Once you have set a limit, you need to follow through with it. Otherwise your spouse will rightfully believe that he can do whatever he wants and all he has to endure is your nagging, which is what you do when you only announce consequences. Don't write a check with your mouth that your actions can't cash. Obviously, you may encounter problems when you are trying to follow through. Guilt feelings, fear of loss of love or that your spouse may escalate his behavior may cause you to hesitate. This is why you need to surround yourself with friends who love you, encourage you, help you to assure you of the rightness of your stance, and help you correct mistakes in the process.

**Observe and evaluate over time.** Once you have begun following through with consequences, you have to allow time again to see changes. Some people only have to suffer consequences a few time to get the message that irresponsibility and selfishness is painful and destructive. Others need more time or different consequences. If you allow enough time, you will learn to understand your spouse better.

Sadly enough, some people have no interest in changing at all and want to live a life unaffected by the feelings and hurts of others. Such behavior grieves God (**Matthew 23:37**), but he gives people even the freedom to be selfish and hurtful, because only the freedom to choose can lead to genuine repentance. If this is your situation, understand that your boundaries are primarily for your protection and only secondarily for changing the behavior of your spouse.

#### 11.5.4 What if it escalates?

Don't be shocked if your spouse escalates the behavior that troubles you instead of giving in. Children do that all the time to test how serious their parents really are and your spouse may not yet have outgrown this childish attitude. Your spouse may become angry, have more temper tantrums, send more guilt messages, or become more of a spendthrift. Be prepared for this. Warn again, stick to your consequences consistently, or make them stricter. Some spouses get the message after a few escalations – others may test you longer.

Be prepared to be resented when you set boundaries. Anger and hatred towards the one who rebukes them is a typical reaction of irresponsible people (**Proverbs 9:8a**). Your spouse is angry with you for saying no to her. Make sure you handle this anger with gentle firmness. Understand where the anger comes from. Try not to react to it but also do not back off an appropriate boundary just to stop the resentment. If you do, you have enabled irresponsibility once again.

This will not be easy, as everyone wants his spouse to love him. Therefore it is important that God and other people fill you up with love and support to replace the hopefully temporary loss of love in your relationship.

**Normalize your doubts.** When your spouse starts assaulting your boundaries, becomes angry, blames you, or intensifies her resistance, you may begin questioning yourself if you're doing the right thing. Are you being unfair, selfish, or unloving? Are you overreacting or secretly trying to punish your spouse? Is establishing boundaries and consequences really wise for your situation or does your spouse need another change before you follow through?

Don't be surprised when such questions come up. After all, you may be trying to set boundaries for the first time and it is all very new for you. Doubts are normal in these situations. Also, your love for your spouse will always make you question your motives. This is a good thing and you should try to answer these questions by thinking them through thoroughly. Setting limits with the person you love most is a serious endeavor and should not be taken lightly. Settle the questions, make the necessary adjustments, and continue the process.

**What if the other spouse wants to leave?** Sadly enough, some situations continue to escalate and may reach a state that simply becomes unbearable for you. What can you do? Is there any chance to avoid the ultimate consequence – divorce?

Although many counselors and even pastors suggest divorce when things become really bad, divorce does not fix the problems of a marriage. It simply ends the relationship. Although God does permit divorce in certain circumstances such as adultery (**Matthew 5:31–32**) or desertion by an unbelieving spouse (**1. Corinthians 7:15**), divorce is not a part of God's plan for a marriage.

I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel (**Malachi 2:16**).

Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate (**Matthew 19:6**).

A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife (**1. Corinthians 7:10–11**).

For a Christian, divorce should not be an option that you should actively consider. Boundaries are meant to be carried within the marital framework. Divorce takes your relationship problems outside of this framework and destroys almost any chance for solving them. The boundaries you establish should aim at saving your relationship and re-establishing the love between you and your spouse, not at destroying them. However, that doesn't mean that you should abandon appropriate boundaries if your spouse threatens with divorce, provided you constantly evaluate your boundaries and consequences before God in prayer.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances: God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (**1. Corinthians 7:15–16**)

If you have tried everything to rebuild your marriage, but your spouse chooses to leave you rather than working through your marriage problems, you are not obliged to fight for the continuation of your marriage or to appease him by abandoning the boundaries that you need to protect your person. How do you know whether he is really saved? If he decides against you and God, the responsibility for his choice is his, not yours.

Obviously, the choice to let your spouse leave permanently should not be made without extensive Christian counseling. Make sure that you don't abuse your boundaries in a selfish way to drive your spouse away from you, so that you can feel as the innocent victim of a spouse who doesn't want to live with you. Instead make every effort to live in peace with your spouse and to be holy (**Hebrews 12:14**). Remember that God does not leave you even during the darkest times. Cling to him and your friends as you establish good limits for you and your marriage.

By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me. Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my savior and my God. (**Psalm 42:8a,11b**)