

In-Laws or Out-Laws

Blessings and Boundaries for Mothers, Daughters, & Mothers-in-law

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I. Introduction

We are here to discuss, as you know, in-law relationships. In particular mothers-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. It would just be my opinion and observation that on this particular topic many times, biblical foundations fail to frame our thinking. Instead there is much potential for emotions and feelings to run high. We can subtly “buy into” the world's definition of what this relationship looks like. Mother-in-law jokes abound and usually portray her as difficult and unreasonable.

In our society today many times we expect there to be problems with our in-laws. Worldly attitudes can subtly be harmful and damaging to your relationships. I would like to submit to you today that we do not have to look like the world does. We can rewrite what our culture says about the Mother-in-law/Daughter-in-law relationship. Consider this scripture.

“The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.” Psalm 16:5-6

Might we dare to consider that this scripture text could refer to these relationships? The Psalmist is acknowledging that the arrangements of his life are ones that he sees that God has providentially ordered. That he is satisfied with the boundaries that God has provided.

As Christian women we then can conclude that the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law that we have, God has providentially brought into our lives. She will be a woman that you will know long term. Two women brought together by God with most likely no previous relationship together. Yet, she will share life with you in some of the most important events of your life. Marriage, children, birthdays and even holidays! In general just living life together.

If we truly believe that God is kind, merciful, good and trustworthy then we can trust Him with these sometimes difficult relationships. He sets boundaries for us and blesses us within those confines. We are going to discuss many aspects of our in-law relationships

and many challenges that possibly can occur. However, I would like to submit to you that if you too like the Psalmist can view these relational challenges as a beautiful inheritance you might find a friend in an unexpected place. In your mother-in-law or in your daughter-in-law.

In order for us to rightly understand God's boundaries and blessings on this topic we have to first see what scripture has to say about our children and their leaving our home to marry.

II. Releasing

A. Practice Releases

Psalm 127:4-5 *"Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them."*

My husband has a bow, arrows and a quiver. He has practice arrows and he has arrows intended to be used for hunting. They are all however intended to take flight...hit some kind of target and intended to make an impact. In order too serve their purpose they must be released from the bow. God's word here compares our children to arrows. Our children just like the arrow are uniquely designed for a purpose. God has a plan for them...a target if you will. A place to make an impact in God's kingdom. They have a specific call on their lives. They were, just like the arrow made to be released. Arrows are not intended to remain in the quiver. The quiver is just a means of keeping the arrows until they are ready to be released. Drawing the bow, releasing the arrow and hitting the target takes much practice of the archer. So it is with our children. From the moment we receive them into our lives we have many practice releases. Many times letting them go can be a difficult process.

For example:

- That first time you put them in the church nursery
- The first time you leave them with a babysitter
- The first time they go to a friend's house to play
- When they start school
- On and on it goes...to getting their drivers license
- Their first job

All of these are practice releases until the ultimate release arrives for your son or your daughter...their marriage.

B. Leaving and Cleaving

1. God wants us as parents to prepare our hearts for the eventual God glorifying season of leaving and cleaving. That time when you will relinquish your role as the primary influence in your child's life.

If you are the daughter for that time in your life when you will transfer your submission from your parent's to your husband. God wants to prepare your heart as well.

Genesis 2:24 *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh."*

When God brought Adam and Eve together he immediately communicated a command concerning marriage. The command of leaving and cleaving. Interesting isn't it? Adam and Eve had no parents to leave.

Why did God say this to them? Because Adam and Eve would have children that they would need to prepare to leave. He said it for us as well. For our benefit and instruction.

God also reminds us of this principle in numerous other places in scripture. Matthew 19:5. Mark 10:7. Ephesians 5:31

2. Definition of leave. In the Hebrew language to leave in this context meant to abandon or forsake all others. Very strong terms aren't they?

Lou Priolo says, "This is a severe kind of leaving."

He goes on to say, "All marriage problems can be traced to the text in Genesis 2:24. Failure to leave or failure to cleave and become one flesh."

What this means is the husband-wife relationship takes precedence over the parent-child relationship. No where in scripture is it indicated that parents are one flesh with their children.

This establishes the fact that in God's sight there is something uniquely different about the marriage relationship that makes it more important than any other human relationship.

It means that the couple are to leave behind the submission to their parents authority that they had as children in the home. Parents can still be a source of wisdom but the children are no longer obligated to obey them. The husband now seeks to lead his wife as head of his own home. The wife is now to acknowledge her authority is her husband. The couple now are one flesh.

Jay Adams says, "Old ties cannot be broken unless there is a 'leaving.' New ties cannot be established unless the old ones are gone."

3. What leaving does NOT mean. It does not mean that the child is to stop respecting and honoring their parents. That is a lifelong command.

Exodus 20:12 *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”*

The word “honor” here means to treat someone with respect due to the person and their role. It meant to provide for them in their old age and to look after them if need be. “Your days may be long” meant to be filled with God’s favor and presence.

In Mark 7 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for finding ways to avoid honoring and caring for their parents. Also, in I Timothy 5:8 it says that to **not** provide for one’s relatives when in need is worse than an unbeliever.

III. The Implications of Leaving and Cleaving

A. Leaving is a difficult process

I just want to state the obvious here from the beginning. When our children leave to get married it is hard and emotional. Remember they are like arrows that we are to release into all that God has for them. Upon releasing them, your relationship changes. We suddenly have to play by different rules as it were.

As parents we now:

- Need to be careful to not be giving my opinion all the time.
- Is there a time that I can or should?
- Should I be offering counsel and help when I see they need it?
- Our children’s leaving creates a whole new role for us as parents.

It is also difficult if you are the son or daughter leaving to cleave to your spouse and create a whole new family.

- The son is now the head of his home and has a responsibility to lead his new wife.
- The daughter now looks to another to be her authority and to care for her.
- These changes are huge adjustments for the young couple.
- Leaving home can be a difficult process and takes time and patience for all concerned.

B. Things that change

- “The two shall become one flesh” changes the parent-child relationship.
- The husband-wife relationship is permanent. The parent-child relationship as we knew it is temporary. God blesses us with children but they are designed to leave as we have already discussed.
- The couple’s relationship is always primary and the children are always secondary.

C. Things to be left behind...old ties to be broken.

- Parental authority. A new home is established. They no longer are obligated to obey their parents. The young man is now the head of his home and the wife is submitted to him not her father.
- Dependence upon provision. This would be for shelter and finances. Not that parents can’t help but the couple is to primarily depend on God together for themselves.
- An inordinate reliance on the parent’s approval. The young couple should primarily be concerned about fulfilling the desires of their mate rather than that of the parents.
- Parental lifestyles not clearly delineated in scripture. This would be traditions and preferences. For example: where they shop...Walmart vs AJ’s. The couple needs to decide what is right for them.
- Adherence to parental values not delineated in scripture. For example: where they invest their money or to what ministries they donated their money to. How they use their time.
- Adherence to parental beliefs and attitudes. For example: what version of the bible to prefer. Eating meat and vegetables or primarily vegetables. How they train and discipline their children. Whether their children are home schooled or not. Whether they raise their kids to court or date.

Again as we have already discussed it is hard when our children leave our home. To step aside from being their number one authority, help, confidant, comforter and encourager.

In Elyse Fitzpatrick’s book The Afternoon of Life makes the point that this transition is difficult because our hearts are filled with pride and we have a great desire to be needed by our children. She says, “God has always been quite able to care for them without me, and he isn’t worried about how he’ll work in their lives now that I don’t have a prominent role.”

Her first point is:

- That we as moms love to be needed. They have needed us all along but we need to face the fact that they need God more and they need now to cleave to their spouse. It is especially difficult when they move to another city or across the country.

Her second point is:

- Do I really trust God that he is able to lead and guide them by his grace?
- Can I trust him even considering mistakes they make or decisions that don't please me or that concern me?

The answer of course is a resounding yes! Our God is faithful and good!!

Wayne Mack says this about leaving....“I believe that most of us do not truly comprehend what leaving mother and father entails. In my experience as a counselor, I have found that though many people would deny that they have any problems in this area, the matter of leaving is one of the most significant and problematic issues in marriage relationships.”

Then there are problems that can occur because we are all sinful. The kind of problems that all the “mother-in-law” stories stem from. Let's discuss a list that I got primarily from Lou Priolo.

IV. Problems that can occur

Relational problems and challenges are issues of the “cravings” within our own hearts.

James 4:1 *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this that your passions are at war within you?”*

Matthew 7:3 *“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”*

A. In the hearts of the married children:

- Excessive dependence on the parents.

- Insecurity or immaturity.

- An inordinate reliance on their parents' approval. (2 Cor. 5:9 tells us all "*So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.*")
- Critical judgments of the in-laws.
- Complaining and murmuring about your spouse to your parents.
- Competitions and rivalry.
- Comparing your mother-in-law to your own mother. (Ephesians 4:2 "*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...*")
- Showing partiality to your own parents over your spouse's parents.
- Allowing parents to dominate the marriage or weigh in with opinions.
- Selfishness on your part.
- Anger and unforgiveness.

B. In the hearts of the Mothers and Mothers-in-law.

- Opinions...opinions...opinions!
- Unrealistic expectations.

- Her parents not respecting their son-in-law.
- Aloof parents.
- Competition and rivalry.
- Taking sides.
- Gossip or discussion to other family members about the young married couple.
- Abusing hospitality.
- Being a busy body, asking too many questions.
- Intolerant when they attempt to establish new family traditions and standards for their home.
- Selfishness and inconsideration.
- Critical of Christianity if the parents are unbelievers.
- Jealousy and bitterness.
- Comparing with the other in-laws.

V. Conclusion

Colossians 3:12-15 “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called into one body. And be thankful.”

This text speaks to the principles in God’s word about all of our relationships. In other words, it is about how we love our husbands, our children, our friends, our neighbors and yes...our mothers, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law. In the life of a believer we should strive for all of our relationships to look like this.