

# COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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## Dealing with In-Laws

Are you struggling right now with one of your in-laws who has been intruding into your marriage? Or, have you allowed your own parent to interfere in your relationship with your spouse? If you are unsure about what I mean by these terms intruding and interfering, let me explain. Has one or both of your in-laws been meddling in your decision-making by exerting undo influence upon you or your spouse? Have they been interfering in the way you discipline your children by overruling your decisions when you are absent? Have they sought to control your mate's thinking by constantly badgering him or her when it comes to the way you run your household or spend your money? Do your in-laws mock or belittle your spouse in your presence? Is one of your in-laws dominating your time by constantly calling or coming by your house? Do your in-laws force their opinions on your spouse so that the decisions you have made privately with your mate are undermined? These are just a few of the ways an in-law can be intrusive and bring harm to your marriage.

### How do in-laws become such a contentious issue in your marriage?

Are you the spouse that doesn't understand why your mate has such an angry and resentful attitude when it comes to your parent's influence in your marriage? If I'm speaking to you right now, please understand why your mate is so upset.

First, intrusive, pushy, interfering, and opinionated in-laws are upsetting to your spouse because he or she believes that your parents are invading

private issues that should only be talked about or decided by you and your spouse alone. Let me give you a parallel example to illustrate what I mean by a private issue. Would you consider it unacceptable if someone came into your home and picked up your check book and began questioning you about your purchases? Wouldn't you take immediate offense to this behavior because it would really be none of their business how you spend your money? Your mate views your parents' intrusion into personal matters the same way.

Second, your mate views your unwillingness to stop these intrusions into your family as a betrayal. Your mate believes that every time you take your parents' side or do nothing to stop your parents' intrusion, you are betraying your vows to honor your mate above all others. Betrayal is one of the deepest offenses that can ever be inflicted upon the heart of your spouse. This betrayal will create tremendous anger and will drive you and your spouse further apart with each infraction.

### What should you do with an intrusive in-law problem?

1. Is there really a problem? First, every husband and wife must come to an agreement that there is a problem. This sometimes is difficult to agree upon because perhaps your spouse doesn't see the intrusive behavior of their parent as a problem. Other times your definition of intrusive and your mate's definition may differ. Remember Solomon's wisdom to help in your definition: The frequency of anyone coming into your house is an important indicator

of intrusion. He taught us, "*Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house, lest he become weary of you and hate you*" (Prov. 25:17). To fully sort out your different views will first require the two of you communicating specifically about what bothers you about one another's in-laws. If you cannot come to an agreement concerning what to do, consider getting input from your pastor to determine what a normal in-law relationship should be.



*Are your in-laws too intrusive?*

However, at a minimum, if one spouse is uncomfortable with an in-laws' interference in the marriage, then some change or compromise must occur. Are you willing to listen to your spouse and make the necessary changes? Or, will you resist any change or counseling help? Your reaction will determine how quickly you will be able to resolve this issue.

2. Discuss God's plan for in-laws. One of the best places to begin to resolve this issue is to determine what the Bible teaches about your relationship with your in-laws. What Scripture teaches on this subject

**"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14**

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must be your standard of truth concerning what is right and wrong. Notice the first thing God declared after He created Eve and brought her to Adam and she became his wife. God said, *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”* (Gen. 2:24). Therefore, from the very beginning of time God saw the importance of giving this direction to couples. It is the *leave and join* principle. The word *leave* is one of the strongest Hebrew words meaning to forsake, leave behind, let alone, or abandon. The word *joined* is another very strong word in the opposite direction. It means to stick like glue, pursue, or hold fast to. God is giving you a direct command to cut the cord with your parents and to be glued together as one with your spouse, thus creating a new family structure independent of all others.

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**Your mate believes that every time you take your parents’ side or do nothing to stop your parents’ intrusion, you are betraying your vows to honor your mate above all others.**

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Therefore, honestly consider, have you abandoned your previous way of relating to your mother and father? Are you more concerned about your parents’ favor and respect or your mate’s respect? Have you forsaken the influence of your parents’ opinions or are you still controlled by what they think about you? Or, about your spouse?

More importantly, have you pursued a new relationship with your mate that supersedes the one you have had with your parents? Have you sought to be glued together with your spouse in your decision making by pursuing your mate’s opinion first? If you have not done these two things here

are the major reasons why there is conflict with your mate.

3. Set reasonable boundary lines. The next step in resolving the in-law issue in your marriage is to set reasonable boundary lines that both husband and wife agree upon. What do I mean by boundary lines? These are predetermined limits that you set so both husband and wife knows what will be allowed in regard to their in-laws. God has set national, moral, and physical boundaries to give us guidance and protection (Num. 33:37; Ex. 20:14; Job 26:10). Let me give you some examples of in-law boundaries. (a.) You must set informational boundaries so you both know what information will be shared with your parents. This boundary will keep you from disclosing information to your in-laws that your spouse desires to remain private. Many conflicts arise between marriage partners simply because this boundary is violated. According to Scripture certain information should not be shared with anyone: *“Debate your case with your neighbor, and do not disclose the secret to another”* (Prov. 25:9). (b.) You must also set time boundaries so that both will know how much time will be spent at the in-laws’ house and how much time they will be in your home. Sometimes husbands and wives fight because the in-laws are always over at your house and you don’t seem to have a moment to yourselves. Or, your spouse is daily at their parents’ home and not taking care of responsibilities at home. Or, there are constant phone calls by the in-law to find out what you are doing that impose upon the time and privacy of your marriage. (c.) You must also set decision-making boundaries so that both husband and wife understand that they will make the decisions in their marriage without having to consult the in-laws first. Or, once a decision is made you should not allow your mind to be changed because one of the in-laws voices disapproval. Taking such action can lead the couple into constant arguments because one spouse wants to back out

of the decision. (d.) You must also set boundaries concerning the discipline of your children so that the standards you set at home are not contradicted when they go to your in-laws’ home. If these boundaries are not set, communicated, and upheld it creates confusion for your children and conflict for the couple. Additional conflict occurs when a spouse refuses to correct their own parents for violating the couples’ boundary.

4. Communicate the boundaries. Once you have agreed with your spouse concerning what the boundaries will be, then you must communicate that information to your in-laws. This can be done when the issue comes up or when the need arises. For example, when you drop off your children at the in-laws’ home, remind them of your rules for their behavior and what they are allowed to watch on television. If there are specific things you are trying to address in the children’s’ discipline ask the in-laws to reinforce your decision. Or, if you have made a decision that the in-laws don’t like, communicate that you appreciate their concern but this decision was carefully weighed by both of you and this is what you have concluded is best for your children. I have found that it is best to have the blood relation communicate your desires with his or her own parents. You could begin something like this: *“My wife and I have decided”* or *“My husband and I have decided.”* Then your parents know that this is a unanimous decision.

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**Betrayal is one of the deepest offenses that can ever be inflicted upon the heart of your spouse.**

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5. What happens if your spouse does not respect the boundaries? Once you have set the boundaries for your in-laws you must now keep to them. If one of the marriage partners violates the agreement then the whole process

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breaks down and sends a double message to the in-laws. In addition, failing to keep an agreement with your spouse is a violation of your word and his or her trust. You must realize that if you violate your mate's trust you have betrayed your vows to honor your spouse. This is a serious issue and will not be easily resolved. Jesus made it clear that He wanted us to be men and women of our word. Jesus said, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'" (Matt. 5:37). If we are not men and women of our word then we are no different than the Pharisees whom Jesus warned, "For they say, and do not do" (Matt. 23:3).

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### **God has set national, moral, and physical boundaries to give us guidance and protection.**

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Therefore, if you have not kept the agreement made concerning the family boundaries then sit down again with your mate and discuss the issue. Ask forgiveness for violating your agreement (Luke 17:3-4). Clarify again your concerns and agree together about what should be done. Then keep your commitments. This is essential if you want your spouse to trust you and your word. When you keep your word your spouse will safely trust in you (Prov. 31:11).

6. What should you do if the in-laws don't respect the boundaries? First, sit down and have a heart to heart talk with your in-laws concerning their compromise of your boundaries. If this action does not produce satisfactory results then propose getting a third party involved by asking your pastor to counsel all parties concerned. If your in-law's are unwilling to get counseling or they refuse to respect your wishes, then your only recourse is to restrict the in-laws access to your family so these specific violations will not occur again. If the intrusions of your

boundaries continue then your only recourse is to stop all contact with the in-laws until there is a sincere repentance, verbal confession of the violations, and a promise to not violate the boundaries again.

Let me give you an example of where this severe action was required. Many years ago I counseled a couple where the wife's mother constantly spoke against her son-in-law. She mocked him in private and then in public. The wife did or said nothing about this slander against her husband which created great tension between them (Prov. 10:18). It became such a problem that the couple separated for a time and talked of divorce. Finally, the wife began to honor her husband and reproved her mother for her malicious behavior. But, this did not stop her. Then the mother-in-law turned to the children secretly slandering and belittling their father behind his back. She was reproved again and was asked to go to counseling. She refused the counseling and refused to admit her fault. I encouraged this couple to cut off all contact with the mother-in-law until sincere repentance occurred. What was the biblical reasoning for this counsel? Note what Jesus said concerning the church at Ephesus: "*Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent*" (Rev. 2:5). Jesus clearly declared that He will remove His presence from this church if they will not acknowledge and repent of their sin. In addition, Solomon told his son to "*Remove your way far*" from a harlot's house so he wouldn't be tempted (Prov. 5:8). Therefore, with these biblical injunctions there is ample reasoning for removing your way far from someone who is undermining your marriage and family.

7. What are the real reasons why you have allowed the intrusions into your family? Understanding why one or both of you have allowed these intrusions into your family is essential to

keep you from returning to this unbiblical lifestyle. Here are some suggestions to consider: Have you failed to realize that the relationship with your parents has changed? Are you unwilling to yield to God's command: "*A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh*" (Gen. 2:24)? Have your parents always controlled you and so you have just allowed it to continue? Do your parents use guilt to manipulate you? Do you fear displeasing your parents more than displeasing your spouse? None of these reasons will produce a godly or happy marital relationship. God doesn't use control, guilt, or fear to help you make the correct decisions in your life. He wants to motivate you by love for Him and others (Matt. 22:37-40). Ask Him to make the changes necessary in you so that your marriage can be all that God intends it to be for you and your spouse.

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### **You must realize that if you violate your mate's trust you have betrayed your vows to honor your spouse.**

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### **Are you the intruding in-law?**

If you are reading this article and you are the in-law that is struggling with your son or daughter, will you take a hard look at yourself and your behavior for a moment?

1. Recognize the relationship has changed. Do you realize that your son or daughter is now someone else's husband or wife? Your relationship has changed forever, and therefore, your behavior toward your son or daughter must change as well (Gen. 2:24). I know you have plenty of good rationales for why the problem between you and your son or daughter in-law is their fault, but

what are you doing to contribute to the conflict? Jesus said, “*First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye*” (Matt. 7:5). Therefore, will you first take a look at what you are doing to cause the conflicts in your son or daughter’s marriage? If you will I’m sure that the Lord will show you your fault. Will you ask God to forgive you for whatever personal fault you find (1 John 1:9)? In addition, go and confess your fault to your son or daughter-in-law and ask their forgiveness (James 5:16). Then purpose to stay out of their lives unless they ask or invite your presence or opinion.

2. You must submit to God. If you know that the Scripture commands your son or daughter to leave you and be joined to his or her spouse, then submit to God’s Word and let them go! This is the only way your son or daughter will be able to be fully established in their new family. By intruding into their relationship you are violating the command of God’s Word and sinning against Him and His plan for another person’s marriage and family. I’m sure you don’t want to do that!

3. Deal with the real issues. You must also understand the real reasons you don’t want to let go of your child. Is it your desire for control, competing for your child’s attention, your fears of being alone, guilt because of past failure, are you putting your children before the Lord? Is the issue your pride because you think you know better, or anger that your son or daughter has left you? Whatever the underlying reasons, you must take these to the Lord and allow Him to change your heart and mind. If you have a hard time coming to an understanding of these issues, I would encourage you to meet with your pastor and receive counseling.

4. If you don’t obey God. Do you realize what you are risking by not respecting the boundaries your son or daughter has set up? Do you understand what can happen if you don’t

let go? You risk disrupting your son or daughter’s marriage and causing tremendous turmoil and conflict between them. You may even cause a divorce. Do you want to see that happen? If the conflicts continue, do you understand that your son or daughter may not want you around at all? This would cause you to miss out in their lives and your grandchildren’s lives. Don’t let this happen. Take the steps that are necessary today!

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For more information concerning the ministry of Pastor Steve Carr or for additional marriage resources for couples and counselors, please contact us at our web site [www.covenantkeepers.org](http://www.covenantkeepers.org) or by email at [ccag@calvaryag.org](mailto:ccag@calvaryag.org) or at 805-481-2320.

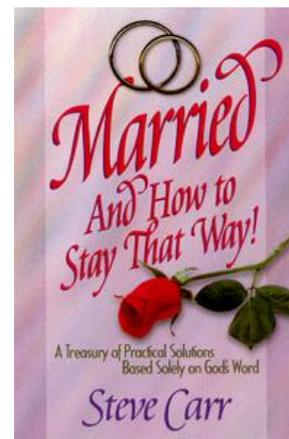
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