

Leaving & Cleaving

Biblical Principles

BIBLICAL MARRIAGE INVOLVES A TRANSFER OF LOYALTY

God's design for marriage involves the "leaving" of parents and the "cleaving" to spouse. This process is intended to facilitate oneness in marriage (*Genesis 2:24*).

GOD DESIRES THE UNION BETWEEN A HUSBAND AND WIFE TO REMAIN UNDIVIDED

Marriage involves a primary loyalty commitment to your spouse which cannot be divided by other people or influences outside the relationship. Jesus taught us nothing is to come between husband and wife (*Matt 19:6*).

Introduction

Throughout Scripture, God often utilizes marriage as a metaphor to convey his love toward his chosen people (*Isaiah 62:5b*) and Christ's love for the church (*Ephesians 5:25*). The relationship we have with Jesus provides essential principles that are helpful to consider as we seek to nurture and grow our marriage. One important principle for married couples to consider is the union God wants us to have with him by "cleav[ing] unto him" (*Deut. 13:4*).

In order for the process of cleaving to take place, there first must be a leaving of things which are not of him. This means we leave other gods, whatever form they may take, and join to him alone as our God by cleaving to his authority, his Word, and seeking to follow Christ's example. *Genesis 2:24* encourages the "leave" aspect as well as the "cleave" aspect not just for a couple's benefit as it relates to their parents, but also for other aspects of life.

The Process of Leaving

The Hebrew meaning of the word "leave" in *Genesis 2:24* is to "leave behind," "depart from," or "let loose." Letting loose is the releasing of something that once was tied. This process is what God calls couples into when they commit to marriage.

The family you grew up in is your family of origin. Many perceptions are shaped by your family of origin including how you see God, yourself, and others. In addition, your unique family structure, daily routines, and early childhood experiences form your relating patterns and beliefs about how life and relationships work. These developmental years mold our answers to crucial questions such as: Am I loved for who I am or for what I do? Is God present or distant? Can I make a mistake and still experience being valued? The answers to such questions influence your temperament and insecurities as well as how you experience love, approach life, and view relationships.

God calls us to leave our family of origin regardless of whether it was fantastic, okay, or horrible. This does not mean turning your back on your parents or blaming them for all your struggles. Rather, leaving is about respectfully transferring loyalties by becoming aware of and naming your family's influence on you, challenging these influences where needed, and, with God's help, shaping something new.

Leaving father and mother involves a complex process of both maintaining ties and responsibilities toward the previous generation, while shifting loyalties to a primary covenantal marriage relationship and the difficult realities around redefining

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certain relationships. The “*leaving*” process also extends beyond parents. Each spouse has a primary loyalty commitment to the other that cannot be divided by children, parents, grandparents, employers, friends or other influences outside the marriage relationship. Jesus taught us nothing is to come between husband and wife (*Matt. 19:6*). This is reflective of the relationship Jesus desires with us.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

An important aspect in the process of leaving is the ability to relate to your parents on more of a peer to peer relationship. What might be the difference between an adult son or daughter versus a grown child? How might this difference show up in interactions with parents?

Several things can inhibit the leaving process. Consider the following:

- Unresolved issues or conflict from family of origin or the past.
- Excessively looking for approval, encouragement, and support from parents, instead of spouse.
- Intrusive parents not respecting a newly married couple’s boundaries.
- Relying too heavily on parents for decision-making, thus leaving the spouse feeling insignificant.
- Revealing details of marital conflict with parents, thus leaving the other spouse feeling betrayed.
- One or both individuals in a couple maintaining a mindset of singleness or allegiance to their friends over their marriage union.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Review the list of inhibitors to the leaving process. Which inhibitor is most likely to be a challenge for you? Why? Discuss together.

A healthy leaving process requires changes in both the parents and the child leaving the family. *Genesis 2:24* is as much a command to parents as it is to the couple getting married. It is wise for parents to understand the dynamics a young couple experiences as they try to forge the identity of a new marriage in the midst of two competing families, while remembering the responsibility is on the new couple to make the break from home.

The Process of Cleaving

Appropriate leaving means you are more concerned about your spouse’s ideas, opinions, and directives than those of your parents, friends, or other extended family. This also means when you commit to marry another person you choose to give up unhelpful comparisons. This type of leaving facilitates appropriate cleaving to one another. The Hebrew meaning of the word “*cleave*” is “to cling” or “keep close.” The modern Hebrew use gives the sense of “to stick to or adhere to.”

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The cleaving process creates a deep connection. It does not allow children to come between parents and play one parent against another or friends to disturb the marriage union. In addition, the newly formed couple will seek to solve problems on their own, allowing their parents to be parents and not gatekeepers. This does not mean they do not seek advice or input from their family of origin, but in the end, they realize the decision is up to the couple.

There are a number of things to consider as you seek to facilitate the cleaving process:

- Consider how to limit the involvement of and set boundaries with individuals outside the marriage relationship (parents, extended family, friends, or co-workers).
- Seek to keep personal marriage issues between you and your spouse.
- Learn to say no to excessive demands outside of the marriage relationship.
- Develop your own social circle and calendar of events.
- Seek ways to grow spiritually together (prayer, Bible reading, & worship).
- Respect your spouse's wishes over your parents' wishes.
- Seek to function as a financially independent unit from your parents.
- Develop and establish traditions for your new family.
- Appropriately grieve the loss of traditions, habits, or gatherings that your family of origin may continue without you and focus on what you are gaining in your new family unit.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Review the list of things that support the cleaving process. Talk with each other about areas you perceive doing well in and areas that may be a challenge or might take intentionality.

The Vision of Leaving and Cleaving

Genesis 2:24 calls husband and wife to “cleave” to one another in affection and loyalty. As a couple leaves their family of origin, they cleave to one another and form a new, unique marriage and family unit, not just an extension of either family. This new couple creation “cleaves” to one another by sharing life experiences, feelings, thoughts, ideas, spiritual beliefs, and their bodies together. The sharing of such intimate details in the marriage union weaves a couple together in a deep and meaningful way (“*threefold cord*”) so that the couple becomes one. This provides an environment where physical and emotional safety can flourish, love and commitment can grow, friendship can be nurtured, and a couple can create a legacy of blessing for future generations.

It is helpful to remember that forming a new marriage relationship will inherently create a tension between balancing desires of your spouse and your parents. This is a tension to manage appropriately and not a problem which can necessarily be solved. It is a process to continue to work through and not a one-time event. Thus, it may be helpful to frequently ask the

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question, “to whom or what am I most loyal today, this month, past year?” and “what message am I sending to my spouse regarding my most important loyalty?” As couples richly grow together, they will be a blessing to parents, children, the church, and the surrounding community as they intentionally live out the biblical principle of Leaving and Cleaving.



For more information, scan or click to listen to a Leaving & Cleaving podcast episode.

Further Couple Exercises

The process of leaving and cleaving is often filled with mixed emotions. In addition, while there are helpful principles to consider in this transition, the process is unique to each individual and family. The following information and questions are designed to help facilitate conversation between the child and parents that provide clarity and realistic expectations in this process.

NOTE FOR CHILD LEAVING:

- We are called to honor our father and mother (*Exodus 20:12*). Consider the care and countless sacrifices your parents made throughout your life and share your appreciation with them. Consider ways you can maintain your respect toward your parents yet form a new family that will be different.
- For some parents, it is very difficult to let go. Be considerate toward the loss that comes with a change in relationship roles while also establishing appropriate boundaries.

NOTE FOR PARENTS:

Psalm 127:3-5 “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.”

In this Psalm, children are compared to “arrows in the hand of a mighty man.” Arrows are designed and built to be released toward a specific target, not to stay in the quiver. Throughout life to this point, you have been “carrying” your child in the quiver. You have poured into them, sharing the truth and grace of Jesus. Now it is time to “let go” of the arrow in the direction of the target (Jesus). Letting them go is allowing the responsibility toward Jesus in their lives to increase and the responsibility toward you as a parent to decrease (*John 3:30*). This does not always come easy, and it is a process to grow in over time. There are certain things you can help with in this process:

- Remember it is okay to share advice and wisdom, but it is also important to leave the outcome with your adult child even when the outcome is different than you would like.
- As your child comes to you for advice or wisdom, consider asking them if they have talked this through with their spouse. This can be particularly helpful early on in their marriage. Remember, the goal is to support healthy cleaving to spouse which at times means refraining from advice-giving until the couple has a chance to talk through things.
- Recognize and communicate to your married child that it is healthy to respect the wishes of their spouse over your own.

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This will likely mean grieving the loss of your child's presence for some family gatherings that were possible prior to their marriage. Seek to not personalize such a decision made by your child. Also, seek not to pressure or guilt trip your child into attending certain family events.

EXERCISE 1 - HEALTHY DISCUSSION¹

Below are several questions designed to lead the parent(s) and child to healthy discussions surrounding the process of leaving and cleaving. Parents are encouraged to take some time to review and think through the questions. This can be followed by a meeting between the parents and the child, without the fiancé present. The purpose of such a discussion is to identify clear and realistic expectations for the transition in relationship roles.

- Do you have any reservations about the character of your own son/daughter getting married?
- Do you have any reservations about the character of your son/daughter's fiancé?
- How will you respond if your son/daughter calls you for help resolving conflict in their marriage?
- What are your expectations of how often you will see your son/daughter once they are married?
- What are your expectations of how often you will talk to your son/daughter once they are married?
- What are your expectations about the relationship you want to have with your new son or daughter-in-law?
- How do you feel about your son/daughter, once they are married, moving away from you? (More than driving distance)
- What role do you believe you should play as a grandparent?
- What are your expectations for holiday gatherings?
- What will you do if you disagree with how your own children are parenting your grandchildren?
- How did you resolve in-law differences of opinion?
- What advice would you give your child for the best use of their time of engagement?

Newly engaged couples need the opportunity to get to know one another and cultivate healthy intimacy and affection for each other. At the same time, there needs to be clear physical boundaries around inappropriate touching. This creates a tension to manage during your child's engagement. Mark an X where your conviction is on the continuum below and talk this over with your child.

No Touching Allowed.....Appropriate touching....No Boundaries for touching

EXERCISE 2 - FAMILY BACKGROUND PATTERNS²

We all have different family backgrounds. Unless you stop and think about the way you grew up, you are likely to repeat the patterns you grew up with (or do just the opposite). The questions/statements here can help you look at your past so that you can decide what to take, what to change, and what to leave behind.

For each item, check the box that comes the closest to describing your past family experiences. Spend some time talking to your fiancé / spouse about your responses. Share with your fiancé / spouse some examples or experiences from your own family.

My parents/adults in the home:

- ☐ Were able to talk openly about their feelings to each other, good & difficult.
- ☐ Seemed to have lots of topics and feelings they couldn't talk about to each other.

In my family:

- ☐ People generally told each other what was going on in their lives.
- ☐ We hardly ever shared with each other what was going on in our lives.

When there was a problem:

- ☐ People got mad, exploded, but never really sat down to solve it.
- ☐ People tended to avoid talking about it.
- ☐ We actually sat down, talked about it and tried to solve it.

In my family:

- ☐ Everyone went their own way. We hardly ever ate together. There was not much structure.
- ☐ There was a balance between time together as a family and time alone. We ate together and had many family rituals.

Regarding discipline and accountability in my family:

- ☐ There were clear rules and expectations. Consequences, for the most part seemed fair, but not always.
- ☐ It didn't exist. We all did what we wanted or what we could get away with.

Trust and honesty:

- ☐ Was important in my family.
- ☐ Was not a big deal in my family.

Kids in my family:

- ☐ Were given responsibilities and expected to make good choices.
- ☐ Had no real responsibilities.

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In my family:

- ☐ We could communicate openly and respectfully for the most part.
- ☐ The communication was terrible – lots of nasty put-downs, negative interpretations, and yelling and fighting all the time.

The parents/adults in my family:

- ☐ Modeled healthy ways to deal with stress and problems.
- ☐ Did not deal well at all with stress or problems (used substances to cope, verbal abuse, avoidance, workaholic, etc.).

The parents/adults in my family:

- ☐ Were openly expressive of love and affection (hugs, “I love you,” kisses).
- ☐ Were not expressive of love and affection.

As a family:

- ☐ There were enjoyable things we did together.
- ☐ We hardly did anything together.

As a kid, I felt:

- ☐ Connected and cared for by my parents.
- ☐ Distant and disconnected from my parents.

My parents/adults in the home:

- ☐ Used fair and effective discipline with the kids.
- ☐ Tended towards excess and abuse in their style of discipline.
- ☐ Were very permissive. We kids felt more like the parents.

My parents/adults in the home:

- ☐ Seemed to put the children’s needs before their own.
- ☐ Seemed to put their needs before those of the children.

My childhood family experience:

- ☐ Was secure and stable for the most part. I could solidly count on both of my parents.
- ☐ Was unstable. The kids had to deal with new parents, or stepparents/siblings more than once. Or, we moved around a lot.

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REFERENCES:

Referencing of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of America of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials.

1. *Conversation Starters for Engaged Couples*, by Cunningham and Straub
2. “Marriage Enrichment at Home,” *Marriage Enrichment newsletter*, May 1988,
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