



# IN-LAW RELATIONSHIPS

*The Chapman Guide to  
Becoming Friends with Your In-Laws*

GARY D. CHAPMAN, PH.D.



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
*Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at [www.tyndale.com](http://www.tyndale.com)

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

*In-Law Relationships: The Chapman Guide to Becoming Friends with Your In-Laws*

Copyright © 2008 by Gary D. Chapman. All rights reserved.

Cover photo copyright © by Steve Dibblee/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Author photo copyright © by Boyce Shore & Associates. All rights reserved.

Designed by Ron Kaufmann

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chapman, Gary D., date.

In-law relationships : the Chapman guide to becoming friends with your in-laws / Gary D. Chapman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-0019-1 (hc : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-0019-0 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Family—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Parents-in-law—Family relationships. I. Title.

BT707.7.C53 2008

646.7'8—dc22

2008012508

---

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i> .....	vii
Chapter 1: Listen before You Speak.....	1
Chapter 2: Learn the Art of Showing Respect.....	25
Chapter 3: Speak for Yourself.....	63
Chapter 4: Seek to Negotiate .....	71
Chapter 5: Make Requests, Not Demands .....	89
Chapter 6: Grant the Gift of Freedom .....	105
Chapter 7: Above All, Love .....	123
<i>Epilogue</i> .....	135
<i>Some Thoughts Worth Remembering</i> .....	137
<i>Notes</i> .....	143
<i>About the Author</i> .....	145



## *Introduction*

*F*or thirty years, people have sat in my office and shared their struggles with in-laws. I have listened as they said:

- ☪ “My sister-in-law is driving me crazy. She is telling me how to raise my children, but she’s single! What does she know about parenting?”
- ☪ “My mother-in-law and sisters-in-law exclude me. They have breakfast out each Saturday and never invite me to join them. They know that my mom and sisters live six hundred miles away. I feel left out of their girl things.”
- ☪ “When my father-in-law comes to dinner, all he can talk about is sports, his work, or what he reads in the paper. He never asks about the details of our lives and seems to be totally disconnected from us emotionally.”

- ☪ “My brother-in-law tries to control my husband. He is five years older and maybe he has done this all his life, but I don’t like it.”
  
- ☪ “Our son-in-law has essentially kidnapped our daughter. Since their marriage, he refuses to let her come to family events.”
  
- ☪ “When my in-laws invite us to their home, they always include all their children and their families. Just once I wish they would have us over as a couple.”
  
- ☪ “My wife’s parents give her money to buy things we can’t afford. I resent that. I wish they would let us run our own lives.”
  
- ☪ “My husband’s mother wants to tell me how to cook. I cooked my own meals for five years before we married. I think I know how to cook. I don’t need her help.”

- ☛ “It’s awkward to invite just my brother-in-law and sister-in-law to do things. My mother-in-law is divorced, and we feel pressure to include her.”
- ☛ “My husband’s parents just ‘drop in’ unannounced. Sometimes I’m in the middle of a project I need to complete. I wish they would respect our schedule.”

Perhaps you could add a few of your own complaints. In-law problems often focus on such issues as control, interference, inconvenience, and the clashing of values and traditions. The purpose of this book is to provide practical ideas on how to work through these struggles and build positive relationships.

When two people marry, they don’t simply marry each other; they marry into an extended family consisting of mother-in-law, father-in-law, and perhaps sister-in-law and brother-in-law. These in-laws come in all sizes, shapes, and personalities. They come with a history of family traditions and

ways of relating to one another. Whatever else we say about families, we can agree that all families are different. These differences often lead to adjustment difficulties.

If we are able to make these adjustments, we can create positive in-law relationships. If we don't, in-laws can be extremely troublesome. Parental relationships—his and hers—are the most common area of in-law conflicts.

In God's plan, in-laws were not designed to be divisive. They were meant to be supportive. Freedom and harmony are the biblical ideals for in-law relationships. In order to accomplish this ideal, marriages must run on the parallel tracks of separation from parents and devotion to parents.

## **SEPARATION FROM PARENTS**

The Scriptures say, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."<sup>1</sup> God's pattern for marriage involves the "leaving" of parents and the "uniting" of husband and wife. Thus, marriage involves a change of allegiance. Before marriage,

one's allegiance is to parents. After marriage, the allegiance shifts to the mate.

We often call this “cutting the psychological apron strings.” If there is a conflict of interest between a man's wife and his mother, the husband is to stand with his wife. This does not mean that the mother is to be treated unkindly; it does mean that she is no longer the dominant female in his life. The principle of separating from parents is extremely important. We will seek to apply this principle in the chapters that follow. No couple will reach their full potential in marriage without this psychological break from parents.

Perhaps nowhere is this principle of separation from parents more important than in decision making. Your parents and in-laws may have suggestions about many aspects of your married life. Each suggestion should be considered seriously, but in the final analysis you must make your own decisions. You must not allow parents to manipulate you into making decisions with which the two of you do not agree.



## DEVOTION TO PARENTS

The second fundamental principle of marriage is that we are to honor our parents. God gave to ancient Israel the Ten Commandments, one of which is, “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, the apostle Paul affirmed this principle: “Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’”<sup>3</sup>

The command to honor parents does not cease when we are married. The word *honor* means to “show respect.” It involves treating others with kindness and dignity. One wife said, “My parents do not live respectable lives. How can I respect them when I don’t agree with what they are doing?” It is true that not all parents live honorable lives. Their actions may not be worthy of respect. But because they are made in the image of God and because they gave us life, we are to honor them. We may not agree with their lifestyle choices, but we can respect them as people even when we don’t respect their

behavior. It is always right to honor our parents and the parents of our spouse. Leaving parents for the purpose of marriage does not erase the responsibility to honor them.

How do we express honor to our parents in daily life? We honor them by keeping the lines of communication open—visiting, telephoning, and sending e-mails. In such communication, you are seeking to convey the message, “I still love you and want you to be a part of my life.” *Leaving* must never be interpreted as *deserting*. Regular contact is a part of what it means to honor parents. Failure to communicate says in effect, “I no longer care.”

Another way of honoring parents is described in the New Testament: “If a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.”<sup>4</sup> When we were young, our parents met our physical needs. As they grow older, we may have to do the same for them. If and when the need arises, we must bear the responsibility of caring for the physical needs of our

parents. To fail in this responsibility is to deny our faith in Christ. Paul the apostle said, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”<sup>5</sup> By our actions, we must demonstrate our faith in Christ by honoring our parents.

### **FROM THE PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVE**

If we are the parents of married children, it will help if we remember our objective. Since their birth, we have been training our children for independence—or at least, we should have been doing so. We have taught them how to cook meals, wash dishes, make beds, buy clothes, save money, and make responsible decisions. We have taught them respect for authority and the value of the individual. In short, we have sought to bring them to maturity. We want them to be able to make it on their own.

At the time of their marriage, our goal of helping them become independent reaches fruition. We have helped them move from a state of complete dependence on us as infants to complete indepen-

dence as newlyweds. In the future, we must view them as adults who will chart their own course, for better or for worse. We must never again impose our will upon them. We must respect them as equals.

This does not mean that we will no longer help our married children. It does mean that when we have a desire to help, we will ask first if they want our help. An unwanted gift is not a gift but a burden. Parents sometimes give financial aid to their married children, thus helping them to establish a standard of living they cannot afford. This practice does not foster independence. Neither should parents use gifts to influence a married child. “We will buy you a new car if you will . . .” is not a gift but an effort to manipulate.

Parents sometimes want to give advice to their married children. The rule of thumb is that parents should give advice only when requested. If your children have not requested your wisdom and you feel strongly urged to share it, at least ask permission. “Would you like for me to share my perspective on that?” is a good question. Giving unsolicited

advice to your married children does not develop positive relationships.

The ideals to which we aspire are freedom and harmony. The married couple needs the emotional warmth that comes from a wholesome relationship with both sets of parents. Parents need the emotional warmth that comes from the couple. Life is too short to live with broken relationships. We will not always agree with our married children, but we can offer respect and give them the freedom to make their own decisions.

So how, exactly, do we become friends with our in-laws? In the next few pages, I'm going to share seven principles that will radically change in-law relationships.

I have intentionally kept this book brief because I know you are busy. You can probably read it in less than two hours. You will find that reading this book is a good investment of your time. At the end of each short chapter are practical suggestions on how to weave these ideas into the fabric of your own family life.

Whether you are the son-in-law, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law, or brother-in-law, these principles are for you. If you will seek to apply these principles to your in-law relationships, I predict that you will begin to see positive changes in the attitudes and behavior of your in-laws. At the end of each chapter you will find a section entitled “Putting the Principles into Practice.” Follow these suggestions and you will be on the road to positive in-law relationships.

# 1



LISTEN BEFORE YOU SPEAK

*M*arsha's mother-in-law is affluent. Marsha, in contrast, grew up in a modest home where the emphasis was on self-sacrifice and giving. Her father was the chairman of the missions committee in their church, and her mother was actively involved in the women's ministry. Every year for as long as Marsha could remember, she had watched her parents save so they could give a significant gift to the annual missions offering. She herself had taken money out of her allowance as a child to give to this offering.

After two years of marriage, Marsha is totally frustrated with her mother-in-law. “Every month, she invites me to lunch. I’m always happy to see her. But after lunch, she insists on taking me shopping in order to buy me a new dress. At first I appreciated her generosity, but as time went on, it seemed like our lunches got shorter and shorter while our shopping sprees extended into the afternoon. She never looks for dresses on sale, and she has bought me some really expensive dresses.”

Marsha continued, “I see it as an extravagant waste of money, and I feel like she is trying to buy my friendship. When I tell her that I don’t need a dress this month, she says, ‘Every lady needs a new dress. It lifts the spirit.’

“Well, it’s not lifting my spirits,” said Marsha. “It’s making me resent her. Why doesn’t she give that money to people who really need it? My closet is full of dresses. I don’t want to hurt her feelings. I’d like for us to have a relationship that does not focus on shopping. I’d like to have a nice, quiet, extended lunch with her. I’d like to know what her childhood was like . . . what kind of struggles she and my



father-in-law had in the early years of their marriage . . . how she felt about being a stay-at-home mom. All she ever talks about is her golf game and her bridge parties. I sometimes get the feeling that she's extremely lonely and that shopping is her way of trying to forget her loneliness. I don't know. I just wish our relationship could be more real."

All these thoughts and feelings Marsha had kept to herself. She tried to share them with her husband, Rob, but his response was, "Let Mom buy you dresses. It's her way of showing you that she loves you." Perhaps Rob was right, but if so, his mother is missing the mark. Marsha does not feel loved; she feels resentful.

"Have you tried to share any of these thoughts and feelings with your mother-in-law?" I asked.

"Not really," Marsha responded. "She's so overpowering. She talks most of the time and seldom asks me a question; when she does, I have the sense that she's not listening to my response. She's thinking about what she's going to say next. I feel tense when I'm around her."

It was obvious to me that Marsha had a mother-in-law problem, and it wasn't going away unless Marsha took some initiative.

“But I can't just tell her that I resent her,” said Marsha. “And I can't stop having lunches with her. That's our only contact. If I tell her I don't want the dresses, I'm afraid she'll be hurt. I really don't know what to do. That's why I'm here.”

“I'm glad you came,” I said. “I'm not a miracle worker, but I do have an idea that I would like to suggest. The next time you have lunch with your mother-in-law, say to her, ‘Before we go shopping, I want to ask you a question. On a scale of one to ten, how much pleasure do you get out of taking me shopping?’ If her answer is eight, nine, or ten (which is what I would expect), then you ask, ‘Tell me why you get so much pleasure out of being nice to me.’”

“Listen to her answer carefully. Then tell her what you think you heard her say and ask her if that is correct. For example, you might say, ‘What I hear you saying is that you enjoy buying things for me because when you were first married, your mother-

in-law did nothing for you and you felt hurt. You didn't want that to happen in our relationship. Is that correct?' Continue to ask clarifying questions until you feel that you understand what is behind her desire to take you shopping.

“Then express appreciation to her for what she is doing for you. Once you understand her motivation, I think you will find that easier to do. Tell her that you really appreciate her being so kind and thoughtful of you. Then tell her how meaningful this conversation has been to you: that you feel like you know her better, and you appreciate her even more. Then go shopping with her and let her buy you whatever she wishes.

“The next month when you have lunch, ask your mother-in-law additional questions. Tell her how much you enjoyed your conversation with her last month and that if she doesn't mind, you'd like to ask her some more questions about her life. You might ask such questions as 'What was it like growing up as a child in your house?' 'What was high school like for you?' 'How did you meet your husband?' 'What made you decide to get married?'

‘What were the early years in your marriage like?’  
‘What have been some of the things you have enjoyed most about your marriage and family?’ These are probably too many questions for one conversation, but pick and choose.

“What you are trying to do is to get to know your mother-in-law better. We do this by asking questions and listening to answers. Again, ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand what she is saying. For example, ‘It sounds like you had a lot of hurt from your father’s behavior. Is that correct?’ Whatever you hear her say, repeat it in the form of a question to give her an opportunity to clarify. Tell her how much you are enjoying the conversation and that you appreciate her willingness to share her story. Then go shopping.

“When she calls the third month and invites you to lunch, you say to her, ‘I can’t wait to see you. I enjoyed our conversation so much last time. I have a suggestion. I’ve been wanting to go to the new art exhibit downtown. What if, after lunch, we go see the art exhibit instead of going shopping?’ If she accepts your suggestion, great. If, on the other

hand, she says, ‘Why don’t we go to the art exhibit *and* go shopping,’ you say to her, ‘Well, maybe we would have time to do that, but could we do the art exhibit first and then play it by ear?’ Chances are, she’ll agree. After you have gone to the art exhibit, the two of you can decide whether or not you have time to go shopping. Maybe you can do a quick shopping trip this time or not go shopping at all. Either way, you have changed the typical pattern of lunch and shopping.

“The fourth month, you can engage her in another meaningful conversation and make the suggestion that perhaps in the future you could rotate between shopping one month and doing some other social activity together the following month. You might say ‘After all, my closet is getting full, and I really enjoy doing other things with you.’ If she accepts your proposal, you have now changed the paradigm of the monthly shopping trip.

“In future months, you can be brave enough to suggest that perhaps this month, instead of buying things for you, ‘We can take my friend’s adopted Chinese daughter and buy clothes for her.’ Or

another month, perhaps you can buy groceries for a needy family or school supplies for a group of students from low-income families. Little by little, you will be helping your mother-in-law channel her giving into areas that both of you feel good about. And you will be getting to know your mother-in-law as a person, not as simply a lady with whom you have lunch and go shopping.”

At the end of our conversation, Marsha was elated. She said to me, “If half of what you have described could come true in my relationship with my mother-in-law, I would be extremely happy.”

Over the coming months, Marsha saw most of these visions turn into reality. She and her mother-in-law became best friends. She learned to accept her mother-in-law’s gifts as expressions of love, and she taught her mother-in-law how to share life on a deeper level. Some months later, I met the mother-in-law in a social setting. She said to me, “Marsha is the best thing that ever happened in my life. Having a son is great, but having a daughter-in-law is even better.” I don’t know how her son would feel

about that, but it is evident that she has a genuine fondness for Marsha.

Marsha's story demonstrates the power of listening. The purpose of listening is to discover what is going on inside the minds and emotions of other people. If we understand why people do what they do, we can have more appropriate responses. For example, Marsha's whole attitude toward her mother-in-law changed when she discovered that her mother-in-law's motivation for buying her dresses was because, in the early years of her marriage, she had very little money for clothes and was often embarrassed about her wardrobe. Understanding often changes our perception of people and, consequently, our negative emotions toward them.

It is a fundamental psychological principle that we cannot read other people's minds. We observe their behavior, but we do not know what is behind the behavior until we listen. Most of us have not been trained to listen. Consequently, we often misunderstand our in-laws. I want to share with you some guidelines for effective listening:

## **ASK QUESTIONS**

The most effective way to find out what is going on in the minds of your in-laws is to ask questions. Most people do not communicate the thoughts and feelings that motivate their behavior unless they are asked. Marsha could readily observe the behavior of her mother-in-law (taking her shopping and buying her dresses), but she did not know that her mother-in-law's behavior was motivated by events that transpired in the early days of her own marriage. This information came only in response to a question.

Questions must be carefully crafted. The more specific the question, the more likely you are to receive the information you seek. You may ask preliminary questions simply to bring up the topic. For example, "Who do you think will win the pennant?" puts the topic of baseball on the table. Then you can ask, "When did you become interested in baseball? And what stimulated your interest?" The answers to these questions may let you know why your father-in-law never misses a baseball game.

Questions must always be sincere. You are not asking a series of questions in order to push your



in-laws into a corner and win an argument. You are asking questions to try to understand them. When people sense that you are genuinely interested in them and want to know them better, they will typically answer your questions honestly and freely. Marsha's mother-in-law was not reluctant to talk about the early days of her marriage. Marsha had simply never expressed interest in that part of her life. When she saw that Marsha was sincerely interested, she talked openly about what motivated her interest in shopping and gift giving.

Asking your in-laws to rate their feelings on a scale of one to ten is a quick and easy way to learn how strongly they feel about a particular subject. Jason used this technique in opening a discussion with his father-in-law. Jason was frustrated over his father-in-law's propensity for gambling. When he learned that his father-in-law had taken Jason's ten-year-old son, Bobby, to the casino, Jason was livid and told his wife, "I will never let Bobby see your father again." Two weeks later, after he'd calmed down, I challenged Jason to ask questions and listen to his father-in-law's answers.

He asked his father-in-law, “On a scale of one to ten, how much do you enjoy going to the casino?” When his father-in-law said “ten,” Jason knew this was something that was extremely important to him. Jason then followed up by asking, “Why do you think you gain so much pleasure from gambling?”

His father-in-law responded, “For me, it’s recreation. I’m gambling because I have money and I don’t have to worry about how I spend it. When I was a child, we had very little. We never knew if we would have a meal at dinner or whether my father would say, ‘Let’s go to bed early, and we’ll have a big breakfast in the morning.’ Breakfast was always oatmeal; we could have as much as we liked. I saw my friends at school with money to burn, and I determined that when I got to be an adult, I would make money and never have to ask anyone for anything. And I have. Now I can enjoy spending my money in any way I choose. If I lose a thousand dollars, so what? I can afford it.”

“So for you,” Jason continued, “it’s not a matter of winning or losing; it’s a matter of having fun.”

His father-in-law responded, “It’s not just fun. It’s freedom; freedom to do what I want to with what I have.”

“I think I can see what you’re saying,” said Jason. “I think all of us want to be free, and this is one way of expressing your freedom.”

In a thousand years, Jason would never have guessed what was going on in the mind of his father-in-law, but two questions, accompanied by a listening ear, helped him understand his father-in-law’s motivation. He still did not want Bobby going to the casino, but having heard and understanding his father-in-law, he was able to express his concerns in a constructive way. He shared his own understanding that many people who gamble are not free but are, in fact, enslaved by gambling and have lost not only recreational money but, indeed, all their financial assets. He explained his desire to keep Bobby from being exposed to something that had the potential for becoming addictive and destroying his freedom, and he requested that his father-in-law not take Bobby to the casino in the future. His father-in-law understood and agreed.

While both Marsha's and Jason's stories have "happy endings," I do not mean to imply that asking questions and understanding the motivation of our in-laws guarantees a satisfactory solution to the issues that trouble us. But by asking questions and listening empathetically, we are much more likely to find a resolution to these issues. And in the process we will be able to preserve—or even improve—our relationships with our in-laws.

### **DON'T INTERRUPT**

When your in-laws are talking, the tendency is to interrupt if they say something with which you disagree. When you interrupt and give your perspective, you have taken the first step to a full-blown argument. Arguments are counterproductive. Someone wins and someone loses, and the issue is not resolved.

Remember when Marsha's mother-in-law said, "I think the reason I find so much pleasure in buying things for you is that in the first years of our marriage, we had little money and I often was embarrassed by the things I had to wear"? Suppose

Marsha had interrupted and said, “*We* have *plenty* of money. Rob has a good job. You don’t need to buy me things.” She would have entered into an argument that likely would have further damaged her relationship with her mother-in-law. Suppose Jason had interrupted his father-in-law and said, “That’s a cop-out; I don’t believe that for a moment. I think you gamble because you’re addicted.” He and his father-in-law would likely have had a shouting match that would have further fractured the relationship.

The purpose of listening is to understand, not to make a point. Our “point” will be made much later in the conversation. In the early stages, we are trying to understand what is going on in the mind and heart of an in-law so that we then can respond appropriately. Interruptions derail the process of understanding. For some people, refraining from interrupting will be extremely difficult. They have developed an argumentative pattern of communication. They listen only long enough to gather their own thoughts; then they interrupt and disagree with whatever the other person is saying. These

individuals will never have a positive relationship with in-laws—or anyone else—until they learn to break the destructive pattern of argument. Relationships are built by seeking understanding. They are destroyed by interruptions and arguments.

If you have trouble continuing to listen to your in-laws when you disagree with what they are saying, let me suggest a mental image that may be helpful. When you have asked a question and your in-laws are talking, picture yourself with huge elephant ears on both sides of your face. The ears remind you “I’m a listener. I want to understand. I will not interrupt. I will have my chance to share my ideas later. Right now, I’m trying to listen to what my in-laws are saying. I want to know where they are coming from, and I want to understand how they view their behavior. I am trying to build a relationship, not make an enemy.” Learning to listen without interrupting is a foundational step to effective listening.

## **CLARIFY MEANING**

Even when we are consciously focusing on listening, we often misunderstand what another per-

son is trying to communicate. We listen through our own earphones, which sometimes distort the meaning behind another person's words. We can clarify meaning by telling the person what we think they are saying and asking if we have heard them correctly. Jason demonstrated this when he said, "So for you, it's not a matter of winning or losing; it's a matter of having fun." This allowed his father-in-law to clarify by bringing up the idea of freedom. From this feedback, Jason was able to learn more about what was going on in his father-in-law's mind.

Some people object that clarifying questions seem to be rather mechanical. One husband said, "I get tired of saying 'What I hear you saying is . . .'. And I'm sure other people must get tired of hearing it." It is true that the same response, couched in the same words, can become monotonous and annoying. However, clarifying questions can be asked in many ways. Here are some examples:

☛ "Is this what you are saying . . . ?"

☛ "Do you mean . . . ?"

- ☛ “I think I understand you. Tell me if I’ve got it right. . . .”
- ☛ “I think what I’m hearing is . . . Is that what you’re saying?”
- ☛ “I want to make sure I understand. Are you saying . . . ?”

When we learn to ask clarifying questions in various ways, the questions become a part of the natural flow of our conversation. When an in-law responds, “Yes, you understand what I’m saying,” then you will know he or she feels you’ve heard correctly. Then you’re ready for the next step.

### **EXPRESS APPRECIATION**

Once your in-law has told you that you understand what he or she has said, you may say, “I really appreciate your sharing that with me. I think I understand you better, and what you are saying makes a lot of sense.” With that simple response, you are no longer an enemy. You have created a positive climate.



Affirming statements do not mean that you necessarily agree with what your in-laws have said. It does mean that you listened long enough to see the world through their eyes and to understand that, in their minds, what they are doing makes good sense. You are affirming their humanity, the right to think and feel differently from other people.

Some will ask, “How can you affirm what your in-laws are saying when you totally disagree with them?” My answer is: You are not necessarily affirming the validity of what they are saying. You are affirming their right to have this perspective. You are giving them the same freedom that God gives them. You are allowing them to be human.

Affirmation does not mean that you agree with their ideas or that you like their emotions. It means that you understand how they have come to hold their ideas and how they might feel the way they feel. Given their personalities and their perspectives on issues, it’s not difficult to see how they could reach their conclusions and to understand their emotions.

I cannot overemphasize the value of expressing appreciation because it creates the climate for the next important step:

### **SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE**

Now that you have asked questions, allowed your in-laws to speak without interruption, clarified meaning, and expressed appreciation, you are ready to share your perspective. Because you have taken the time to treat them with dignity and respect, they are far more likely to listen to your perspective.

When Jason shared with his father-in-law why he did not want Bobby to go to the casino, his father-in-law was willing to listen and agree. Had Jason not taken the time to first listen to his father-in-law, had he simply condemned the older man's behavior and told him that Bobby would never be allowed to go with him to the casino, their relationship might have remained fractured for a lifetime. It was the process of listening that brought them to a healthy conclusion.

When Marsha began to suggest alternatives to shopping, her mother-in-law was open to the alter-

natives because she sensed that Marsha genuinely wanted to have a good relationship with her. Had Marsha not expressed appreciation for her mother-in-law's willingness to share information from the early years of her own marriage, the mother-in-law might never have been open to Marsha's suggestions. When we express appreciation, we are more likely to be heard by our in-laws and to reach a satisfying solution.

Your perspective on the situation is also extremely important. You are one of the key players in this in-law relationship. You need to be heard; your ideas and feelings are important. Now that you have communicated a positive respect for your in-laws, you are ready to say, "Let me share my perspective with you. Here is what I'm struggling with. Here is my objective. Here is what I think is important." And you fully explain your perspective.

Because you have listened, you are far more likely to be listened to. Because you have not interrupted, you are less likely to be interrupted. Because you have clarified meaning, your in-laws are more likely to clarify meaning. Because you

have expressed appreciation, they are more likely to express appreciation to you, and together, you can accept your differences and find healthy solutions.

In this chapter we have discussed the first step in becoming friends with your in-laws. Listening has brought you deeper understanding of each other, and understanding has led you to positive conclusions that will make the future easier for all of you. In the next chapter, we will look at the power of respect.

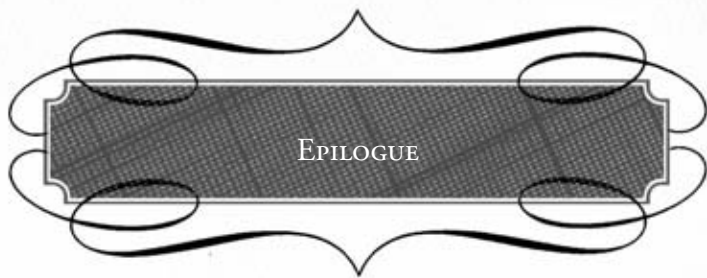
## **PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE**

Choose an in-law relationship that you would like to improve, and think about this specific relationship as you consider the following questions:

1. What questions do you need to ask in order to better understand your in-law?
2. In your conversations, do you have a tendency to interrupt? If your answer is yes, what will you do to break this pattern?

3. Try using clarifying questions in your next conversation; for example, “Is this what you are saying?”
4. Read the following statement aloud three times: “I really appreciate your sharing that with me. I think I understand you better, and what you are saying makes a lot of sense.”  
Look for an opportunity to use this statement with your in-law.

When you learn to ask good questions, clarify meaning, express appreciation, and refuse to interrupt, you will then be ready to say, “Let me share my perspective.” Since you have listened to them, they will likely listen to you.



*P*ositive in-law relationships are one of life's greatest assets. Living in harmony, encouraging and supporting each other in our individual pursuits, helps all of us reach our potential for God and good in the world. On the other hand, troublesome in-law relationships can be a source of deep emotional pain. When in-laws resent each other, hurt each other, or withdraw from each other, they have joined the ranks of dysfunctional families.

The seven principles I have shared with you in this little book have helped hundreds of couples develop positive in-law relationships. I hope that you

will not be satisfied simply to have read the book. My deep desire is that you will earnestly seek to weave these principles into the fabric of your daily life. It will take time and effort, but the rewards will last for a lifetime.

Enhancing relationships is indeed a worthy endeavor. When you enhance in-law relationships, you are making life more pleasant for your children and your grandchildren. It is my sincere desire that this book will help you learn to listen, show respect, make requests, grant freedom, speak for yourself, seek to negotiate, and above all—love your in-laws. If you practice these principles, I can guarantee that your in-law relationships will be strengthened. You may even genuinely become friends with your in-laws.

If you find these principles helpful, I hope you will share them with your friends. They, too, are likely struggling with in-law relationships. I believe the principles shared in this book could help thousands of couples develop positive in-law relationships. If this happens, I will be greatly pleased. If you have stories to share with me, I invite you to click on the Contact link at [www.garychapman.org](http://www.garychapman.org).



## SOME THOUGHTS WORTH REMEMBERING

- ☛ The purpose of listening is to discover what is going on inside the minds and emotions of other people. If we understand why people do what they do, we can have more appropriate responses.
- ☛ Relationships are built by seeking understanding. They are destroyed by interruptions and arguments.
- ☛ Affirming statements do not mean that you necessarily agree with what your in-laws have said. It does mean that you



listened long enough to see the world through their eyes and to understand that, in their minds, what they are doing makes good sense. You are affirming their humanity, the right to think and feel differently from other people.

- ☛ Respect leads me to give my in-laws the same freedom that God allows me and all humans—the freedom to be different. Therefore, I will not seek to impose my will upon my in-laws. Rather, when I find myself at odds with them, I will look for a solution that will show respect for our differences.
- ☛ Religious differences often become divisive in the marriage. They can also create barriers to wholesome in-law relationships.
- ☛ The invasion of privacy is a common area of conflict with in-laws. But when the younger couple show respect for their

parents' and in-laws' intentions and openly share with them their own frustrations, most of the problems can be resolved.

- ☯ The mature person is always looking for wisdom, even if it is spoken by a mother-in-law. When parents and in-laws make suggestions, their ideas should be given due consideration. After all, they are older and perhaps wiser than we are.
- ☯ Learning to respect the peculiarities of our in-laws is necessary if we are to have harmonious in-law relationships. In fact, if we were to fight our in-laws over every issue that we consider to be weird, quirky, or wrong, we would spend the rest of our lives in battle.
- ☯ When we begin a sentence with *you*, we are speaking as though we have ultimate knowledge of the situation. In reality, we are giving only our perception. Such

statements come across as condemning and will likely stimulate a defensive response from your in-laws.

- ☞ When you speak for yourself, you are making valid statements. You are revealing *your* thoughts, feelings, desires, and perceptions. “I think . . .” “I feel . . .” “I wish . . .” “My perception is . . .” All these statements are valid because they are revealing what is going on inside *you*. You are speaking for yourself.
- ☞ To negotiate is to discuss an issue in order to reach an agreement. Negotiation is the opposite of withdrawal and resentment. When we negotiate, we are choosing to believe that there is an answer, and with God’s help, we will find it.
- ☞ We cannot force our in-laws to do what we believe to be “the right thing.” We can and should make requests of them. If we have desires, these desires should be verbalized.

- ☯ The greatest gift that parents can give their married children is the gift of freedom.
- ☯ Love is not a feeling. Love is an attitude, a way of thinking, and a way of behaving. Love is the attitude that says, “I choose to look out for your interests. How may I help you?” A loving attitude leads to loving behavior.
- ☯ We make in-law relationships better or worse depending on how we speak to our in-laws. Loud, harsh words make things worse. Gentle, soft words make things better.
- ☯ We cannot expect all our differences to be resolved overnight or with one conversation. It takes time and diligence to understand another’s point of view and to negotiate answers to our differences. It is both a lifelong process and the heart and soul of relationships.

 *Notes***INTRODUCTION**

1. Genesis 2:24; see Ephesians 5:31.
2. Exodus 20:12; see Deuteronomy 5:16.
3. Ephesians 6:2-3.
4. 1 Timothy 5:4.
5. 1 Timothy 5:8.

**CHAPTER 2**

1. *The New Webster's Pocket Dictionary* (New York: Lexicon Publications, Inc.), 1990.
2. Exodus 20:12; see Ephesians 6:2.
3. See 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.
4. See Proverbs 11:14.
5. Exodus 18:17-19.
6. See Exodus 18:22.

**CHAPTER 5**

1. 1 Corinthians 13:5 (NLT).
2. John 6:66-69 (NLT).
3. Matthew 7:7-11 (NLT).
4. Acts 20:35.

## — *About the Author*

Dr. Gary Chapman is the author of the perennial best seller *The Five Love Languages* (over 4 million copies sold) and numerous other marriage and family books. He is currently working with best-selling author Catherine Palmer on a new fiction series based on *The Four Seasons of Marriage*. Dr. Chapman is the director of Marriage and Family Life Consultants, Inc.; an internationally known speaker; and the host of *A Love Language Minute*, a syndicated radio program heard on more than two hundred stations across North America. He and his wife, Karolyn, live in North Carolina.