



Family Christian Center

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CLASS NAME: Prep for Marriage – Ring Rights | Lesson 8: 3-Ring Circus – In-laws vs. Outlaws

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Are You Marrying Into a 3-Ring Circus?

In-laws, Outlaws, and everything in between

What is a 3 Ring Circus? The literal meaning of the term **three-ring circus** is a circus show that consists of acts performed in three rings, simultaneously. Sometimes in marriage, you may feel that you must simultaneously please your immediate family, your in-laws, and your spouse all at the same time. What can also be difficult in a marriage at any stage of the relationship **is the feeling that you must perform or put on an act** that you or your spouse never agreed to participate in with extended family. Unfortunately, this act can span a lifetime if you or your spouse do not create adequate boundaries in marriage in which there are only two rings that take precedence in your marriage and not three.

However, there is a secondary definition for a 3-ring circus that also applies to today's teaching in which, a 3-ring circus is also an idiom that means **a situation that involves a lot of chaos, with a lot of frenetic activity that is difficult to process**. The idiom three-ring circus may describe a situation that is stressful and out of control, **in which a family member primarily an in-law inserts themselves unnaturally into your marriage**, causing confusion in which family turns against family creating enemies within your own household.

Matthew 10:35-36 NIV Version

35 For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

36 **a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.**’[a]

A Ring of Truth to It...

In-laws, Outlaws, and everything in between

A couple drove several miles down a country road, not saying a word. An earlier discussion had led to an argument, and neither wanted to concede their position. As they passed a barnyard of mules and pigs, the husband sarcastically asked, "Relatives of yours?"

"Yep," the wife replied, "In-laws."

Ouch! You may have heard the adage, a **ring of truth** in which, the truth is told in a joke. Well, the uncomfortable truth about the relationship between marriages, in-laws, and extended families is the potential divide of households. Some questions are, "who is going to be in charge?", and "who will have the final say?" surrounding family matters, especially during weddings. This is a topic of discussion often among every family member except the married couple. This power struggle pits spouse against spouse, and family members against family members; dividing the marriage before it can even begin.

Mark 3:25

New International Version

²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.

The Shakespearean play "**Romeo and Juliet**" brings new meaning to the marital vow "**till death do us part**". However, Shakespeare is not the first to write accounts of friction and the difficulties in blending marital families, no, these trials in marriage are first spoken of in the Bible. The word of God prepares us for every possible conflict if we steep ourselves in understanding His precepts within the word of God. It is fair to say that the tensions of In-Law relationships are a thoroughly documented subject and is often joked about in talk shows, by screenwriters, novelist, sitcom producers, and comedians all over the world. Why? It is probably the awkwardness of joining one couple in holy matrimony with multiple members of extended families, with different points of view, different personalities, and different agendas that are frankly...scary.

No one wants to be put in an uncomfortable relationship where:

- Boundaries are crossed
- Rules are broken
- Personal views are disrespected.
- Beliefs are violated
- Expectations are unrealized.

However, the Bible is very clear on the hierarchy of the marital relationship in the household. No one has to guess where God stands on the covenant of marriage; the first ordained relationship created by the Lord. **His stance is abundantly clear.**

Leave and Cleave Mandate in Marriage

Don't Ring us, we'll Ring You!

Ephesians 5:31

New International Version

31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."^[a]

Though the road map is clear regarding who takes the leading stance in marriage, many engaged and married couples bicker with in-law relationships because **someone fails to follow the leave and cleave mandate of Ephesians 5:31.** We encourage you, to cut the natural and the spiritual umbilical cord from your parents and stand on your own two feet or your marriage will be over before it ever begins.

Additionally, please don't think that the leave and cleave mandate only applies to the parents of your spouse, we have seen many busybody siblings, cousins, and aunts who wreaked havoc on new marriages. We have also seen countless marriages that initially had a fighting chance become strained because one mate doesn't want to move forward, or one spouse's parents just don't want to let go.

Why, because of a lack of clear expectations, and blurred boundary lines; then next thing you know one family member is disrespected and an offense is made.

Luke 17 New King James Version (NKJV)

Jesus Warns of Offenses

17 Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no ^[a]offenses should come, but woe *to him* through whom they do come!

Let's be clear, what we are about to say is not intended to offend you but liberate you to do things differently than other family members or friends that are not successful in their marriages. Our goal is to inspire you to have the most successful marriage God provides.

Hear us, if you do not begin on the proper footing with your mate or spouse, it is difficult for your parents, in-laws, siblings, and family members to respect your marriage. It's not right, it is just what it is. Remember, we are born of a sinful nature, and none of us are without sin, the Bible states in **Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"**, however, unfortunately, that does not stop family members from throwing stones at your glass house, even though they live in glass houses themselves.

The Bible calls us not to give an appearance of evil (living in sin) while attempting to validate ourselves through marriage. Why? Well, it gives the devil unnatural precedence in your marriage, and remember his objective is to **steal, kill and destroy your marriage**.

The adversary may seek to weaponize your family members to point out your sin, and inconsistencies in your spiritual life, creating footholds and using the life you are currently living to **invite the enemy** in the form of accusations, judgment, and being naysayers prior to and during your marriage. We encourage you to be holy in God's sight and give up all sin in your life prior to marriage and stay that way by (**abstaining from sex before marriage, moving to another room of the house if living together, stopping the disrespect of your in-laws, and family members, etc.**).

Ephesians 4:27

New International Version

²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold.

As your marital gemstone graders, we pray that you give the enemy no equal footing in your life or marriage over God, but the decision begins and ends with you.

Equal Rights*

Ring Right #1 – The Right to Equal Rights in Marriage!

2 Corinthians 6:14-18

New International Version

Warning Against Idolatry

14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? **15** What harmony is there between Christ and Belial^[a]? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? **16** What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? **For we are the temple of the living God.** As God has said:

"I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people."^[b]

17 Therefore,

**"Come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.**

**Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you."[c]**

18 And, "I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters,
says the Lord Almighty."^[d]

Equally Yoked Mandate*

In the Bible, the apostle Paul explained being unequally yoked to unbelievers of Christ as having two oxen attached to a yoke (a wooden crosspiece attached to two animals) as an uneven match. The Amplified Bible refers to this as making mismatched alliances with unbelievers. Marriage is an ultimate alliance. Furthermore, to be linked to someone that does not match your marital weight causes not only resentment, but it drains the resources of the stronger mate while trying to pull the weight of a marriage. It's too large of a burden to bear.

Apostle Paul's Example

Picture this. Using Paul's example, one ox is tall, and the other is small. Better yet, imagine that one ox is stronger, and the other is weaker. **Both are assigned an equal task to pull their own weight on the unbridled path to marriage.** Do you really believe that the weaker ox is doing its fair share? The answer is no! The reason is simple: the weaker ox is incapable of completing the task based on its own limited resources. It literally does not have the goods needed to complete the task at hand. Additionally, it benefits from this arrangement and can continue looking as if it's working hard when really, it's only along for the ride. The burden is laid solely on the stronger ox, who is clearly doing all the work and reaping none of the rewards.

Equal Carat-er (The Weight of the Diamond)

Now imagine a lifelong commitment called marriage—try pulling all the weight in that relationship! If you want to cripple faith in a steadfast believer, watch the aftereffect of an unequally yoked union. It's absolutely devastating to watch. According to *Strong's Concordance Dictionary*, unequally yoked is derived from the root word heterozygous. This is a compound of: **héteros**, "another of a different kind" and **zygós**, "a yoke, joining two to a single plow" – properly, different kinds of people joined together but unevenly matched; hence "unequally yoked" (not aptly joined).

Take it a step further and recognize that this union is not only mismatched, but it's attaching or binding yourself to someone in marriage who is running contrary to faith. Why start your marriage off on the wrong foot? Imagine two individuals running in two different directions at a high rate of speed while tethered together. What would the aftereffect be? Both people would reach the end of their rope and come crashing back into one another, neither accomplishing anything. One would be too tired to fight and the other too stubborn to win.

A Coal versus A Diamond

Uniting ourselves to people who do not love, follow, or submit to Christ is direct disobedience. God did not put this mandate to restrict you from love but as a protection from pain and the continuous discord that has led many to divorce. It is not because unbelievers aren't good enough, or worthy of our love, or that they are somehow inherently incapable of being a good marriage partner. In fact, they are often more loveable than believers! God is calling us to love *Him* more than we love our own desire for a relationship. No matter, how beautiful or handsome he or she is, you disagree on the most important thing in life: **The love of the one and only true God.**

Create A Diamond Standard

If you marry someone whose core beliefs are in complete opposition from your own, then expect toxic conflict. The Bible says it best: ***Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? (Amos 3:3 NKJV)***. Over the years, many new couples have misconstrued this Scripture reference, often believing that they must be in complete agreement with one another to be happily married. No, in fact, it doesn't mean absolute agreement. It simply means, for you and your mate, that if you are walking together, then you must have agreed to take the same path. This implies you agree to walk in the same direction but not in the same way.

So, it's fair to say that you have agreed to run the same marriage race by the obvious fact you are running it together. We encourage you to adjust—consider the earlier metaphor of starting off on the wrong foot. We urge you to take an even deeper look. Marrying an unbeliever is more like having one broken right foot in the race for your life.

Realize that throughout your "marriage race," a broken right foot is a painful, cumbersome burden. Even more, the longer you attempt to stand upright injured, the less likely it is that your right foot will be able to heal properly. Over time, it will become infected and will not only hold you back but will contaminate your entire bloodstream. We encourage you to be wise and recognize that some relationships, no matter how promising they appear to be, will never work—believers and nonbelievers are an unhealthy mix.

James 3:11-12

New International Version

¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

A Cubic Zirconia Disguised as a Diamond

Well, you have heard of the adage, “**A wolf in sheep’s clothing**”, right? What about a Cubic Zirconia posing as a Diamond? It happens every day. Plus, there’s more to this. Do not believe that just because your mate sparkles that he or she will shine. In fact, just because your spouse identifies as a Christian, does not mean that you are **automatically** equally yoked. The appearance of being equally yoked is by far the most dangerous illusion affecting modern couples and marriages today. The appearance or the falsehood of legitimacy can place a new couple—a marriage—faced with the weight of the world on their shoulders—left standing on thin ice.

For example, the belief that just because both you and your mate attend church services and have an understanding there is a God, somehow this means you are equally yoked. This is a common mistaken understanding in new relationships. In fact, attending church services and stating the obvious fact that there is a God doesn’t mean you believe in God. It simply means you know the address to the church, and you know that God resides there, but God does not reside in you.

Knowing that you can find the Lord in church but never having a relationship with the Lord of that church proves you are only an attender, not a member of the body of Christ. Sentiments of faith without active service in the body of Christ—including “**I believe there is God**” or “**God knows my heart**”—shows a **lukewarm** relationship with Christ. To be clear, understanding there is a God doesn’t prove spiritual maturity, nor does it provide a clearly defined individual relationship with Christ. It doesn’t mean that God is known to you, and most importantly, it doesn’t mean you are known to God.

- **In what ways, has your significant other/spouse (past or present) established their covenant with the Lord to you?**
- **Are you under the authority of a Pastor or a Faith Leader for the body of Christ (church)?**
- **If applicable, is your mate/spouse an active contributor to the House of God?**
- **Does your Faith Leader know you; know of your service or that of your mate/spouse? In what ministry? In what capacity?**
- **Has previous, “church hurt” limited your desire to serve in the house of God? Is your hurt greater than your love for God?**

For example, in the book of John, the Lord explains the call of Christianity to a believer:

John 10:14 New King James Version

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.

Kiss the Ring

What is Honor among Parents?

Exodus 20:12 New International Version

12 "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

Please do not forget another crucial binding Biblical statement, "**Honor thy mother and thy father**". Many couples prior to marriage often don't realize that this command from the Lord applies specifically in marriage. Yes, those faithful words..." **Until death do us part**" have a familiar ring to them in marriage. Please understand on your wedding day that you are making a covenant with your spouse before God as one flesh, that as long as you are married here on earth, you will also honor your spouse's mother and father as they are your own parents; until death do you part. Didn't know that did you? Daunting, isn't it? Our God is all-encompassing, and he is not a respecter of persons, nor does he show favoritism to one parent over another parent, all mothers and fathers should receive honor and respect from all sons, sons-in-law, daughters, and daughters-in-law.

Romans 2:11

New International Version

11 For God does not show favoritism.

It sounds scary now, to discuss dealing with In-laws but prior to the 20th century in biblical times you chose your spouse based upon your in-laws and not the other way around!

Honoring parents

Proverbs 1:8-9 New King James Version (NKJV)

Shun Evil Counsel

8 My son, hear the instruction of your father,
And do not forsake the law of your mother;
9 For they *will be* a graceful ornament on your head,
And chains about your neck.

Ringling Endorsement

I have to honor my parents/in-laws when they don't honor me?

The second fundamental principle of marriage is that we are to honor our parents ([Exodus 20:12](#)). This command 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?"** Not all parents live honorable lives. Their actions may not be worthy of respect, but because of the special God-given role they've played in our lives, it is always right to honor our parents and the parents of our spouse.

How do we express honor to our parents in daily life? By keeping the lines of communication open — visiting, telephoning, and sending emails. Such communication conveys the message "I still love you and want you to be a part of my life." Failure to communicate says in effect, "I no longer care."

Dr. Gary D. Chapman is the author of The New York Times best-seller [The 5 Love Languages](#).

Marriage has a Familiar Ring to It

Should we choose our mates based on our in-laws?

Isaiah 30:21
New International Version

21 Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

Yes, we recommend that you take your in-laws into consideration prior to marriage. Why? Well, because this is for the rest of your life! Why wouldn't you? In most cases, your fiancée's life experiences with their parents have shaped them into the people they are today. To believe the presence or lack of presence of a primary caregiver has no effect on the outcome of your mate's existence would be premature.

All significant others should have a clear understanding of what they are marrying into. There shouldn't be any surprises and navigating the inner workings of your new existence is the best thing for you and your mate. It's not pretentious, it's not intrusive; it is fundamental and wise to investigate the physiological connections of parents and in-laws prior to marriage to help you see if you want to be connected in covenant; in mind, body and in spirit to your spouse; including his/her family.

Throwing Your Hat into the Ring ***Biblical Betrothals***

In Biblical times, love and romance had nothing to do with the decision for marriage or engagement. ***The betrothal was negotiated for the sole purpose of bringing two families together and to ensure that both the bride and the groom were provided for.*** It also ensured that the groom was committed to marriage by paying a dowry to the bride's father or by offering his services for an extended period if he did not have the financial capacity to pay a dowry to the bride's father prior to the engagement. This is a fundamental difference in modern marriages. No longer is it customary for the groom to work for his bride. It is an honor to be married but, in the 20th-century women outnumber men in the desire to be married.

Isaiah 4:1 New International Version (NIV)

4 ¹In that day seven women
will take hold of one man
and say, "We will eat our own food
and provide our own clothes;
only let us be called by your name.
Take away our disgrace!"

Most importantly, the engagement period was in place to provide time (***usually a year or otherwise determined by the father of the groom***) to allow the bride to adjust to her new role, resolve prior family obligations, adjust to her siblings, parents, and at times her fiancée as well as begin to prepare for the new household she would soon oversee. It was a formal contract that was initiated by the dowry for the bride. Feelings weren't involved and allowed the couple to accept their responsibility first and then in time grow *to love one another through the consummation of marriage.*

Dowry: A dowry, sometimes called a bride price or bride wealth, was a payment made by a man as a gift to the family of a woman he desired to be his wife. In [Genesis 29](#), Jacob loved Rachel and offered to work seven years for her father, Laban, in exchange for her hand in marriage. This is one example of the ancient convention of the dowry.

Author | Got Questions

Outlaws

Laban and Jacob

Genesis 29:18-30 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁸Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."

¹⁹Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." ²⁰So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her."

²²So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. ²³But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. ²⁴And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant.

²⁵When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?"

²⁶Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. ²⁷Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work."

In-Laws

Naomi and Ruth

Naomi and Ruth Return to Bethlehem

⁶When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's

home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

¹¹But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹²Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— ¹³would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”

¹⁴At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

¹⁶But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” ¹⁸When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.