

## Leave and Cleave: The Importance of Boundaries

### Toben and Joanne Heim

At one time, we lived five doors down from Toben's family. And we lived in a townhouse, so five doors down was the equivalent of about one hundred feet. My parents were just a twenty-minute drive away and Toben's aunt and uncle lived only five minutes from us. Needless to say, we were completely surrounded.

So we're not quite like Adam and Eve. As the first couple ever, they weren't exactly typical. They knew they were right for each other from the start. Besides the fact that God quite literally made them for each other, there wasn't any other competition. As far as I can tell, they never planned a wedding. This eliminated a lot of potential disagreements like who to include in the wedding party, where to have the reception, what kind of food to serve, and who to invite -- or not to invite. As the only people on earth, they didn't suffer from the trap of comparing each other to the man or woman across the street, in the cubicle next door, or sitting next to them at the traffic light. And let's face it -- they didn't have in-laws.

Let me say right here that I have great parents-in-law. Toben's parents have loved me from the time Toben and I started dating and have shown that love to me in countless ways. They invited me on family trips, included me in family traditions, and told me a lot how much they loved me. In fact, Pamela never refers to me as her daughter-in-law, but always introduces me as her daughter-in-love.

I was talking with a woman the other day who was amazed that I'm still sane after having lived so close to my mother-in-law. "I thought the other end of town was too close," she said of her husband's mother. But living so close to Toben's parents has been great for us. We respect each other's homes, free time, and the right to say no to a last-minute dinner invitation.

Back to Adam and Eve. I think it's interesting that even though they didn't have parents, God still included this verse in the very beginning of the Bible: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24, NIV).

One of the reasons this verse stands out to us is that you have to know what you're leaving in order to leave -- especially when there's no great distance involved. It's all about family history. That's not to say that we're not supposed to do anything like our parents did, but as we've said before, it's important to look at where you came from and discuss that with your spouse.

So what does leaving and cleaving look like? In short, establishing clear boundaries.

Many books have been written about boundaries, explaining what they are, why they're important, and how to set them with the people in your life -- especially the difficult ones.

In a nutshell, boundaries are just what they sound like -- lines (albeit invisible ones) that define how we operate. For example, because we lived so close to Toben's parents, it was to just drop by any time. And sometimes that was okay. But something we usually did out of respect for each other was call before stopping by. That way, we didn't interrupt dinner or family time -- or catch them in their underwear!

Some boundaries -- like calling before visiting -- just happen naturally. Because my parents lived farther away, we called before going to their house. Other boundaries require more planning and more communication. *Not* talking about them is fertile ground for conflict. Whatever the issue, be realistic when setting boundaries. What may be a big deal to you may not be a big deal to your spouse.

### **First Steps**

*What boundaries have you set with your parents since getting married?*

*Hanna:* We've not really set very many boundaries with my parents. They live in another state and have been intentional about giving us our own space. They usually wait for us to call them and don't assume anything when it comes to where we'll spend the holidays.

*Brian:* My parents live in the same town as us. While we haven't set formal boundaries, we're learning to ask more, and assume less.

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