

# **Setting Boundaries, Entitlement Thinking and Demanding Respect**

*Posted on: November 19th, 2012 by Leslie Vernick*

**This Week's Question:** My husband says that he is put into a kind of uncontrollable rage when I disrespect him because it is his god given right as the husband to be respected. Last night I told my husband who has physically struck me in the past that I felt unsafe in our marriage and that I thought it was necessary that we lay some ground rules and boundaries specifically to be enforced during our times of arguing and fighting so that we can keep each other accountable.

He resisted in agreeing boundaries were the issue but finally agreed. I told him that a universal boundary should be absolutely no physical striking or threats of physically hurting of any kind toward one another. To that he said that his boundary equivalent to that was "no disrespect/raising my voice to him." He said that when he is disrespected, he feels he is being verbally abused by me and it feels as terrible as I feel when he slaps me on the arm/leg/head.

In theory this sounds "right". He says that I am making a double standard when I put a boundary on his behavior but that he cannot on me. And yet, something does not seem right at all about what he is saying. I agree that disrespecting your husband is as sinful as physically striking your spouse in anger. Is it biblical to see these exactly the same in terms of setting "off limit" boundaries in disagreements?

**Answer:** Your struggle to think clearly in this muddle is common to women who live with abusive men. I want to help clarify some important truths.

First your husband's rage and subsequent acts of violence toward you are not uncontrollable. His behavior is always his choice. I'm sure he has experienced disrespect from other people in his life – his employer, a rude driver, your children, a friend, an enemy. People sin against us all the time in many ways and sometimes we do get angry. However, that doesn't mean we hit them. In fact, isn't that what we teach our children NOT to do when someone takes their toy or makes them mad? We don't hit people when we're mad. Period!

Let me ask you a question. Does your husband hit other people in the arm/leg/head when he feels disrespected? What do you imagine a police officer would say if your husband used that as his excuse when he hit someone who disrespected him in traffic or at the mall?

Hear this important truth. Your husband hits you when he is mad because he chooses to and you have continued to enable him by not enforcing legal consequences that would protect you from this kind of abusive behavior.

He says that it is his god-given right to be respected. It's also your god given right to be loved and cherished. When he fails to love and cherish you and you feel hurt or angry, do you hit him?

The second truth I want you be crystal clear on is that you will fail your spouse and he will fail you. Sometimes these failures are big but often they occur in little ways. He doesn't love me like I'd like or she doesn't respect me like I want her to. The truth is, our spouse doesn't always give us what we want even if what we want is a good and godly thing. Hurt and disappointment occur in every marriage and we can feel angry.

But is the right answer to treat our spouse with abusive behavior or abusive speech when they don't give us what we want? Jesus says "never!" The Bible labels that kind of behavior sin and selfishness and is never justified.

The truth is no one gets everything he or she wants all of the time. Part of growing up and maturing is learning how to handle ourselves in a godly, mature way when we are disappointed, angry and hurt when we don't get what we want.

Your husband's entitlement thinking has deceived him into believing that since he's entitled to be respected, he's entitled to hit you when you're not complying with what he wants. That is absolutely not true. How do other men handle being disrespected by their wives? They might pray for their wife. They might talk with their wife. They might get counseling as a couple. A much healthier response to his disappointment or hurt when you don't respect him is for him to say, "Honey, that hurts me when you talk to me that way. Would you please stop?" Or even, "When you talk to me that way, I can't hear you. I'm ending the conversation."

As far as boundaries – you're right, you will never feel safe to have a conversation with your husband let alone disagree if you fear for your safety. In the same way, if your husband fears your tongue and being disrespected, it's hard for him to share his honest thoughts and feelings with you.

However, I'm not sure of his definition of disrespect. You were very clear with your definition of what you want stopped, no physical threats or physical violence. His definition was fuzzy – "No disrespect or raising your voice". Does that mean that when you feel strongly about something or disagree, you can't speak with an elevated voice without him feeling disrespected? Does that mean that you cannot argue because he will feel you don't respect his opinion? Does that mean you have to agree with everything he thinks because not to will feel disrespectful to him?

You need to ask him to define for you the behavior that feels disrespectful to him. Is it calling him names? Is it swearing at him? Is it rolling your eyes? If you know what it is specifically, then you can decide whether or not you can agree to stop or change it. If you don't know what it is, then the rules always change and he can feel disrespected just because you open your mouth in protest.

Finally, a first step boundary or safety plan for both of you might be that when either one of you feels unsafe, the one who feels unsafe can stop the conversation and the other person will respect that boundary and stop talking.

If it continues to be unsafe to have difficult discussions together and you have important things that need to be decided, then you will agree together to engage the help of a counselor to help you learn to speak safely and respectfully with one another and to handle your disappointment in a more godly way.

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