

# SIX

## Person or Object, Honor or Manipulation?

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### What You'll Learn in This Chapter:

- Sometimes even when we think we're loving our spouses, we're manipulating them. We treat them like objects whose sole purpose is to give us what we want. We reward them if they give us what we want and punish them if they don't.
  - Loving your neighbor as yourself means not evaluating, judging, or responding to people based on whether they can give you what you want or help you avoid what you fear.
  - An attitude of honor is a critical ingredient of love. Honoring your spouse means:
    - ~ Understanding that your spouse belongs to God.
    - ~ Being willing to work to help your spouse grow.
    - ~ Being willing to learn from him or her.
  - Larger patterns of manipulation can help us identify the desires and fears that prevent us from loving our spouses. To get what we want or avoid what we fear, we might move toward others, away from others, or against others.
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## Attitude Evaluation

THE LAW OF love, as we've seen, is to love your neighbor as yourself. The first step in applying the law of love to your marriage is to examine your most basic attitude toward your spouse. When you look at your spouse what do you see, a *person* or an *object*? It seems like an insulting question. Even if you did see your spouse as an object, would you admit it? Before you answer "person" too quickly, let's see how easy it is to slip into seeing others as objects and how difficult it can be to spot.

## A Random Act of Manipulation

Howard, a counselee, stood in the checkout line of a grocery store. In front of him an elderly woman dug through her change purse.

"You're short seventy-three cents," the cashier informed the woman.

"I'm sure I have it in here somewhere," the woman explained as she began dropping pennies onto the countertop. She looked apologetically at the line behind her and continued digging through her purse in search of anything bigger than a nickel.

A few moments later Howard leaned forward, handed her a dollar bill, and said quietly, "Take this. It's okay." The woman looked up with a sheepish grin, uttered a quiet thank-you, and quickly paid the cashier.

As Howard shared his story I wondered if something had clicked. I'd been challenging him on his attitude toward his wife and was not sure if anything was making sense. "That's encouraging, Howard," I remarked. "It sounds like you saw an opportunity to love someone in a simple, concrete way, and acted on it."

"No," Howard answered. "I saw an old woman in my way, and I realized that the quickest way to get rid of her was to give her a dollar."

"Oh," I responded, suddenly not at all sure where this was going.

"I know that woman walked away thinking that I did a nice thing for her, but I didn't. I didn't love her. I just wanted her out of the way."

“So, what does that mean?” I asked.

“It means I’m a selfish jerk,” he said.

Howard didn’t see a *person* in front of him at the grocery store; he saw an *object*, an obstacle to his goals. The difference between people and things is that love requires us to treat people with an honor and respect that we don’t give to things. Unlike

things, all people share three characteristics: (1) they have a unique identity and purpose, (2) they are free to make responsible choices, and (3) they have worth.

People bear God’s image and deserve honor as existing uniquely for God’s purposes.

Being a person means more than these three things, but at the very least, personhood involves these things. When we speak of God as a person, we mean that these three things are true of him. God has a unique identity and his own purposes, God makes responsible choices, and God has infinite worth.

Made in God’s image, every person ultimately belongs to God. God has the final say on who people are, what purposes they serve, what choices they make, and what they are worth. People bear God’s image and deserve honor as existing uniquely for God’s purposes. Honoring them doesn’t mean we approve of everything they do. It doesn’t even mean that we like them. It means we view them and treat them as belonging to God, not to us.

An object is a thing that may or may not be unique, makes no choices, and may or may not belong to anyone or have value. In everyday life, we value objects that are useful. An object can lose its value suddenly if we no longer want it or can use it. By definition, we manipulate objects; they exist for our use. We may use objects wisely or foolishly, but using them isn’t bad in itself.

When we use people—when we treat people like objects—we violate the law of love, degrade the image of God, and destroy relationships.

## Manipulation in Marriage

Howard hadn't taken the step of love that I had hoped, but he had made a critical first step. He realized that he could, in the guise of being thoughtful and caring, be selfish and manipulative. He didn't become a loving person that day, but he was no longer blind to his own selfishness. He realized that he was manipulative, that he was willing to use other people to get what he wanted. It would no longer be as easy for him to point to all the nice things he had done for his wife, while brushing off her complaints that he didn't care about her. In reality, many of those so-called nice things were part of a strategy for silencing her, getting her out of the way, and keeping her from coming between him and the things he really loved.

Howard isn't a monster or even that unusual. Howard is much like all of us. He was simply "giving to get." Recall how we saw that Jesus observed our tendency to be nice to the people who are nice to us. We give to get and we give only when we get. It's so common that, as Jesus says, even those who seem to have no conscience at all (the "pagans" and "tax collectors" of his day) live that way (Matthew 5:43–48).

A formal agreement to give to get is called a contract. If you do your part then I'll do my part. We all live with contracts. Contracts are often put into place to prevent people from manipulating one another. We use contracts to enforce rules of fair play. In that sense, even the pagans and tax collectors observe a crude form of love. But that isn't the fullness of love that we're called to in marriage.

On our wedding days most of us promised something to the effect, "I take you to be my lawfully wedded wife [or husband] . . . for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." That's a poetic way of promising, "You have my love forever, no matter what." But when you bring to marriage the agenda of giving to get, you break your commitment to love. The "no matter what" quality of the wedding vow is replaced with "give me *this* or *else*." Rather than acting out of genuine concern for your spouse, you treat

him or her as a means to an end, as a way to get what you want. Instead of serving your spouse, you're using him or her to serve yourself. You're treating a person like an object.

### Manipulation by Punishing

Sometimes manipulation is easy to spot. The most obvious forms involve punishing our spouses for failing to do what we want. It's as simple as me wanting Kim to be home on time to run errands so that I can finish my Bible study. Focused only on what I wanted and needed, I saw nothing else. For that hour, Kim existed only to make my schedule work. I lost sight of her as another person who needed my care and concern. That's why it didn't occur to me to worry about her. When she came home I punished her through sullen withdrawal, removing myself from the relationship. My message was, "If you don't care enough to be available when I need you, then you can feel what it's like for me to be unavailable to you!" In a small but significant way I treated Kim as if she were an object, even threatening to discard her like a possession that's beyond repair.

### Manipulation as Favoritism

As Howard realized, a more subtle and attractive form of manipulation is a strategy of offering rewards instead of punishment. The Bible calls this kind of manipulation, favoritism. Cloaked in the guise of love, favoritism can be nearly unrecognizable as manipulation.

In the second chapter of James, the Bible describes how the wealthy were getting special treatment in church. A poor man is asked to sit on the floor or to stand so that a wealthy man can have a good seat. Notice how James diagnoses the problem of favoritism. He writes, "have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:4). By playing favorites, the church leaders have elevated themselves above others, judging and evaluating who's more likely to give them what they want. Hoping that the wealthy man will bless them with money and power, they give him what they can—

a good seat—and take it away from the man who has nothing. The leaders have treated both the wealthy and the poor man as objects, things to be valued by their degree of usefulness. The rich man is chosen, and the poor man cast aside.

**F**or our marriages to grow in love, they must be built on a foundation of honoring our spouses as people who have value regardless of whether we're getting what we want.

James notes that these judges don't seem concerned about the law. In fact, by practicing favoritism they violate the essence of the law, love. James writes, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers" (James 2:8–9). When we elevate ourselves above others, judging and evaluating them, we aren't loving them.

In many ways, Howard was not an angry or difficult husband. In fact, he could be warm and charming, planning surprise getaway weekends, bestowing lavish gifts, and telling his wife how wonderful she was. For many years his wife loved this about Howard. But over time Howard's attentions made her feel manipulated. Often, they followed angry arguments or preceded upsetting news. She began to realize that she was being paid off. Howard needed to see beyond the acts, which seemed loving, to his self-serving heart.

For our marriages to grow in love, they must be built on a foundation of honoring our spouses as people who have value regardless of whether we're getting what we want. If we show them favor only to get what we want, even if the things we want are good things, we become manipulators who suck love out of our marriages.

### Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself

The way James applies the law of love helps us to understand what it means to "love your neighbor as yourself." As simple as this

command seems, there's been much confusion about what it means, especially in recent years.

Some have taken it as a command to love yourself as well as a command to love others. Some have even argued that the command to love others—even your ability to love others—is founded on the love that you have for yourself. This command is important to understand because it defines a fundamental duty in worship.

First, recall that Jesus gave this second great commandment as an application and expression of the first, the commandment to worship God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, orienting every area of our lives around him. Jesus delivered these two commandments together because each is best understood in light of the other. Love, often understood as an emotion or confused with getting what we want from others, is a person. Jesus, God's Son and his perfect *image*, is love that we can see, hear, and have a relationship with. By following him, by worshipping him, we're schooled in what love really is. As the Bible teaches in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." To say that our ability to love others is based on love for self is to neglect the truth that Jesus makes the second great command (love for others) dependent on the first (love for God).

In the command to "love your neighbor as yourself," what does "as yourself" mean? Why does Jesus not say, "Love one another as God loves you," as he does elsewhere? Just as with the first great commandment, Jesus again quotes from the Old Testament, this time from Leviticus. In Leviticus 19 loving your neighbor summarizes the preceding verses, which contain many commands that illustrate how we're to love one another in the details of life.

Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. . . .  
Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD. . . . Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but *love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:11, 16b, 18, italics mine)

In this context loving your neighbor as yourself means that you should give others the same kind of concern and care you would want them to give you. Jesus applies it this way in Matthew 7 (the Golden Rule): “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

The Golden Rule probably sounds similar to things you heard from your parents or have said to your own children: “You don’t want someone to take your things, so don’t take her things. You don’t like it when others lie to you, so don’t lie to them.”

But also, the phrase “as yourself” reminds us that because of sin we don’t *want* to treat others the way we’re treated. Deep down we don’t want to be equal with others; we want to be superior to them. Sin entices us to exempt ourselves from the rules—to rationalize why we aren’t bound by the same rules as everyone else. This is exactly what the Bible describes in James 2.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, our self-centeredness expresses itself in what we worship. Idolatry is a way of describing self-service in the language of worship. Through idolatry I elevate myself above all others, including God, and determine how others can best be employed to serve me and meet my felt needs.

In James 2:8, “as yourself” marks a boundary that you aren’t to cross. You aren’t to see yourself as better or more entitled than others; they’re your equals, worthy of the same respect, honor, and care God demands that they extend to you. So, stated *negatively*, the second great commandment can be restated as, “Don’t selfishly elevate yourselves above your neighbors.” Or put even more simply, “Don’t manipulate others.”

## Learning to Honor Your Spouse

If manipulation violates love, then honor fosters love. When you honor others you acknowledge their value and importance. Most often the Bible encourages giving more honor to others than we give ourselves. In his letter to the Philippian church Paul writes, “Do nothing

out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). Paul understands this as a critical attitude of love because he sees it in Christ’s attitude.

A few verses later he continues,

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5–7)

At first, this may sound like a sure path to being abused and taken advantage of. You may think, “If I let my husband know I consider him more important than me, I’d be waiting on him hand and foot.” Remember, love doesn’t mean being your spouse’s yes-man but, rather, being determined to do what’s best for him. As Jesus’ own life illustrates, that doesn’t always make others happy.

## Attitudes of Honor and Manipulation

### Honor Acknowledges That You Belong to God, not Me

Manipulation sees others as objects that exist to serve my own felt needs. Honor sees others as God’s image bearers who exist for him.

God’s image bearers belong first and foremost to God. Your identity as someone’s spouse is secondary to your identity as a servant of God. In his letter to the churches in Rome, Paul addresses Christians that are disagreeing over an array of religious matters ranging from the kinds of food they should eat to what day of the week they should worship. What troubles Paul most is the attitude that these Christians have toward each other. He asks pointedly: “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?” (Romans 14:4a). In other words, “You act and speak as if this other person is your possession!”

Attitudes of Honor	Attitudes of Manipulation
You belong to God.	You exist to serve me.
You're made in God's image.	You're an object.
I give without expecting a return.	I give to get what I want from you.
I want you to be successful.	I need you to make me happy.
God is using you to make me like him.	You're the problem.
I'll love you, even if you don't respond with love.	I'll love you as long as it "works" (i.e. changes you).

To follow Christ is to accept him as your master. He's the owner and ruler of it all. Our acts of love are to be done because we worship him, not because other people own us, and we shouldn't demand the attention of others as if we own them. In marriage we have an obligation to fulfill our promises to love each other, but remembering each other's responsibility to love is very different from seeing the other person as someone (or *something*) who exists only for you.

Paul goes on to write,

For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. (Romans 14:9-10)

Though in marriage we belong to each other in a very real sense, we don't belong to each other more than we belong to God. Your spouse

has value and purpose far beyond his or her role as your spouse. We serve one another in marriage, but that service is only an extension or expression of service to God.

Remember, marriage was not created as a substitute or replacement for God. We *worship* God. We *love* our spouses. When we make our personal desires the measure of our spouses' worth, we're playing God. We want them to exist for us, to be devoted to us with their all, and we judge them if they fail to meet that standard.

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### Manipulation Cries, "You're Mine, All Mine!"

Have you ever put your spouse on a pedestal, adored them, treated them like a prized possession, told them that you *need* them? There are people who wince to hear their spouse talk that way. Being needed in that way can be oppressive and suffocating because it's a sign of insecurity and neediness, not love. Being loved and being needed isn't the same thing. In the sense that we were made for relationship we need others, but that's very different from living out of a sense of desperation that communicates, "Without you I'm not going to make it."

Carl often told his wife how much he needed her. Whenever I heard him say this, I could see her fear. Why fear? Because whenever Carl felt lonely or insecure, he would look to his wife for affirmation and approval. If she didn't notice his bids for attention, he would often explode in anger and accuse her of not loving him. When Carl said, "I need you," it didn't mean, "I want what's best for you." It usually meant, "I feel like I have to have something from you to survive." When you need someone like a starving person needs a meal, you're putting him or her on the menu. No one wants to be eaten alive even if they're being told they're loved in the process. Anger comes when the person needing security and approval realizes that his spouse is unable to truly

satisfy his hunger. Rather than recognizing that he's demanding the impossible, he punishes his wife for being unwilling or unable to meet his need.

## Honor Considers How to Build You Up

Love isn't about getting your spouse to fill your sense of need. Jack Miller offers a great definition of what it means to serve one another in love: "Practically it means to labor to make others successful."<sup>7</sup> Love involves your effort to make your spouse successful. What does it mean to be successful?

Recall that being made in the image of God means you have a destiny. As we've learned, you were created to mature and grow to be more and more like God. Have you ever looked at your spouse and considered that he or she was made to be a picture of God here on earth? Sin has done a lot to make it difficult for us to see that image in each other at times. Understanding that it's your job to shine and polish that image is one way to think about what it means to love your spouse.<sup>8</sup> When you're in tune with the fact that you stand before an image bearer and child of the almighty God, it's hard to see that person as an object that exists for your purposes. C. S. Lewis explained the weightiness of this reality and the obligations it brings this way:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one

another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.<sup>9</sup>

### Manipulation Blames Your Spouse

Your desires are sure to conflict with your spouse's desires. What do you do when the inevitable conflict comes? One natural, sinful reaction is to view your spouse as a problem—as an obstacle to the things you want.

In the kitchen of the counseling center where I work there used to be an old soda machine. I don't know how old it was, but as I stood in the kitchen one afternoon sipping my afternoon soda I noticed how beat up the machine was. It had no casters and couldn't be moved around, and it was too heavy to carry or drop, so how did it get all of those dents and scrapes? I realized that most of those dents weren't accidental; they were the result of human hands and fists, maybe even mine. What do you do when you put your money into a vending machine and it doesn't give you what you've paid for? If you're like me, you give it a not-so-gentle swat hoping it will either digest your coins or free up whatever mechanism is keeping you from your soda. Within moments that machine can change from the beloved dispenser of a refreshing drink to a thief standing between me and what I crave. One minute it's the solution to my problems, the next minute the cause of them. One minute I love the machine, the next I hate it.

If you find yourself grumbling about your spouse, regarding him or her as an obstacle that stands between you and happiness, you're sliding into a mind-set of manipulation. You're focused on what you want and not seeing your spouse as a person.

### Honor Learns from Others

When we're frustrated with our spouses, there's actually a very different way of thinking about them that can lead to real growth. If

one of God's purposes in marriage is for us to love our spouses as his possession and build them up, it should dawn on us that he intends for them to have the same effect on us.

In other words, whereas manipulation means seeing your spouse as a tool in your hands, honoring your spouse means seeing him or her as a tool in God's hands. God is able to use our spouse's actions—noble or foolish—for his good purposes. One way to immediately

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begin to transform ordinary moments into extraordinary ones is to pause, no matter how annoyed you are, and ask, "What's God trying to teach *me*?"

For example, when I was not able to reach Kim on the phone that frustrating Saturday, things would have been different if I had stepped back from my frustration and asked God to help me understand it and learn from it rather than immediately focusing on Kim as a threat to my plans. Even if Kim were actually wronging me, God could teach me something about my own heart and his love and care for me. The key is to pray for the humble attitude of someone who wants to learn and is even willing to ask for input.

Quite apart from how God can use our spouses' weaknesses and sins to teach us, we should be willing to learn from the positive ways that they're different from us. The Bible celebrates the ways that God has made us different from one another. It uses the image of the human body, describing its different parts and their functions (see Romans 12:1–8 and 1 Corinthians 12), to help us understand that our differences often complement one another and help us to move toward maturity as one. Living together as Christians we see that God has made and equipped us to do things differently from each other. Be willing to learn from them.

## Manipulation Says That Won't Work

When we focus on changing our spouses rather than being willing to learn from them, we often find ourselves evaluating every course of action in terms of what works. Trying to figure out what works is often just another expression of the attitude of giving to get. When we love our spouses the way God asks us to, there isn't always an immediate payoff. Love requires us to do difficult things, things that don't seem fair or may not even make much sense to us. Love requires us to define success in terms of God's agenda, not our own. What works from God's perspective is what causes us to grow.

## Patterns of Manipulation

To admit that you can be manipulative is simply to say that you're a sinner. The question isn't whether you manipulate but how you manipulate. Taking the time to identify the typical ways that you manipulate your spouse can be a real advantage to growing in love. There are several typical patterns or styles of manipulation. As you read about them, consider which style you use. Each provides clues to heart issues or idols that drive you in your marriage.<sup>10</sup>

## Moving toward Others

Sometimes acquiring the things you want or avoiding the things you fear means you need to get more out of the people in your life. Say, for example, you crave approval, affection, intimacy, belonging, or safety. Those are things you get from other people—and sometimes it takes other people to get what you crave, people that must be brought into your world. If acceptance is one of your chief desires, you may use any number of various strategies to attract others; you might hone a great sense of humor, be an extravagant gift giver, or be ready to help others out, for example. On the other hand, if you don't have much confidence in your ability to gain others' acceptance, you may employ more "negative" strategies like pouting, withdrawing,

becoming clingy, or even taking more desperate measures like harming yourself.

### Moving Away from Others

Sometimes acquiring the things you want or avoiding the things you fear requires *less* of the people in your life. Some people find that peace, control, perfection, order, and safety are more easily secured by having fewer people in their world or by exercising tight control over those who are there. Some of the same “positive” strategies mentioned above can also serve as a way of carefully controlling or limiting other people’s access to your world. For instance, a sharp wit can be an invitation to someone’s company or a way to jab at those you want to keep at a distance.

### Moving Against Others

Sometimes acquiring the things you want or avoiding the things you fear requires you to move *against* others. If you desire superiority, control, success, or power, you’ll probably be moving against the wishes of others in order to get them or to demonstrate that you have them. Making sure that my plans succeed and yours fail can give me a sense that my plans are better than yours and that I’m better than you. When you fail I feel more successful, so I take steps to ensure that you fail. Strategies for moving against others can be as elaborate as dominating vacation plans or as small as nit-picking another person’s grammar.

You may have noticed that some desires and fears occur in more than one pattern of manipulation (safety and control, for example). The desires and fears are listed under their more typical pattern, but keep in mind that, depending on how it’s used, each pattern can serve any and every desire or fear. The motives suggested above for each pattern provide a typical starting point for understanding what motivations might lie beneath your relational patterns or those of your spouse.

The above patterns don't always suggest sinful manipulation. Love itself sometimes moves toward others, sometimes away from others, and sometimes against others. There's more to love than drawing near. Sometimes love requires moving away from one you love so as not to participate in evil. Or you may need to create distance in an abusive relationship. Love may even call you to move against someone you love—not to that person's detriment but in challenging sinful behavior or to protect others. In marriage, love will, at times, require you to say no or otherwise challenge your spouse just as God challenges us when we need it.

Start with an honest look at your own attitudes. Many couples stumble in their first attempts to change because they're expressing an attitude that undercuts every effort to love. When you look at your spouse, do you see someone who *should* be loved and given respect and honor as a person? Or do you see your spouse as an obstacle to the things that you desire or a shield that fails to protect you from the things you fear? Whose best interests most shape the way you think and feel about your spouse?

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## Think about It

- Recall an instance, apart from your marriage, when you were used by someone or treated like an object. How did it feel? Why?
  - Think about your spouse's strengths and abilities as a person. How might you learn from them? How might God use them to help you grow? Think about some of the typical frustrations or ordinary moments of your marriage. How might God be asking you to learn and grow from those as well?
  - What is your typical pattern of relating to people? Do you tend to move toward, away from, or against others? Do you respond differently in different relationships? Do you have a typical style in your marriage?
-