



Personal “Hedges”

By Nancy Leigh DeMoss

Staying Vigilant

As I have studied the Scripture, observed others’ lives, and seen deeper glimpses of my own heart over the years, I have come to realize that no one—no matter how spiritual—is exempt from the potential of succumbing to moral temptation. I have also become convinced that any woman can bring about the moral downfall of any man—no matter how godly. This is one area of our lives where we can never afford to be less than vigilant.

According to God’s Word, a vow is a serious, binding commitment to God and not to be made or taken lightly. I have only made a few vows to the Lord. One of those sacred commitments is the vow to be morally pure. This is such a serious matter to me, that I have asked the Lord to take my life before I would jeopardize a marriage or come between any man and his wife.

I have often been in a position where it would have been possible to cultivate an inappropriate relationship with a married man—or at the very least to make incremental compromises that could have fueled sinful desires in my own heart or in someone else’s heart.

Why Do We Need Personal “Hedges”?

Over the years, the Lord has led me to develop a set of “hedges” (boundaries) in relation to the men that I have served with and related to in various settings. Those hedges have been a powerful safeguard and protection—for my own heart, for those men and their marriages, for my reputation, and most importantly, for the reputation of Christ.

I have been blessed to serve alongside of many men who have strong hearts for God. But I never assume that I (or they) are beyond being tempted and falling. The Enemy eagerly looks for opportunities to cause God’s children to fall.

Let me explain the concept of “hedges” a bit more clearly. By “hedges,” I mean boundaries we establish in our relationships with individuals of the opposite sex. (My focus in this piece is particularly on our relationships as women with married men.) Just as hedges surround our property to protect and surround what is ours, and define what is not ours, we also need hedges in our relationships. Once those hedges are in place, they need to be carefully maintained.

Each woman needs to know her own areas of weakness and vulnerability—especially if she has not been morally pure in the past—and adjust her hedges as needed, for greater protection. My personal “hedges” have been developed as I have

watched others—and myself, at times—deal with difficult or tempting circumstances in relationships with members of the opposite sex.

Another word picture I have found helpful is the concept of “guardrails.” Anyone who has driven on a narrow mountain road knows how crucial a guardrail is for safety. Staying within the guardrails provides protection from falling off the edge of the mountain, but it represents more than that; it represents freedom. Guardrails do indeed “restrict” us, but they also free us to drive without fear.

Restrictions or Protections?

For those who may consider these principles “legalistic,” I would suggest that far from being restrictive, these “hedges” have allowed me to enjoy healthy, wholesome friendships with the men with whom I work and serve, as well as with their wives and children. Adhering to these practices has allowed me to have a part in strengthening marriages and family relationships.

I am not suggesting that all of these “hedges” are biblical absolutes or that violating any of these would necessarily be sin. However, after seeing the anguish and heartbreak of broken marriage covenants brought about by the entrance of a “third party,” I have come to believe that these are wise parameters and that those who violate them do so at their own peril.

Helpful Guidelines

This is not an exhaustive list or a guarantee against infidelity. These are simply some of my personal “hedges”—principles that have served me well during many years of working alongside married men. It was never my intent to publish this list. However, as I have shared this concept of establishing personal “hedges,” I have often been asked if I would be willing to share mine.

Further, I have watched enough naïve or foolish women (and men) act in inappropriate ways toward the opposite sex—and then been called upon to pick up the wreckage left behind—that I felt it would be helpful to share these specific examples.

My “hedges” reflect my desire to be discreet and not to defraud the men around me—through my speech, actions, dress, or attitudes. To some who have been influenced by our permissive culture, these standards will probably seem excessive. To which I would simply ask: what’s it worth to you to avoid the devastating consequences of adultery? It’s hard to imagine how an adulterous relationship could develop if these precautions were maintained.

For those who don’t know me personally, you might think this approach borders on being obsessive. However, I have found that as I hold to biblical convictions and keep specific practical “hedges” of this nature in place, I don’t have to “obsess” about guarding my heart or having pure relationships. I can trust God to work in and through me as I relate to men in godliness, purity, and wisdom.

It is my prayer that God will lead you as you seek to establish effective “hedges” and “guardrails” for your own life, and that you will experience the freedom, joys, and blessings of “keeping your heart with all diligence.”

Practical “Hedges” in Working with Married Men

Most of my contact with married men has been in the context of the workplace—working and serving together in ministry. A huge percentage of emotional and physical “affairs” begin in the workplace.

The following “hedges” are specifically targeted toward relationships with married men in the workplace, but most could be applied more broadly to relationships in other settings, including the church, school, counseling situations, social or community groups, etc.

These “hedges” are not necessarily a measurement of spirituality—it would be possible to abide by a list twice this long and still have an impure heart or be guilty of self-righteousness. No “list” can be a substitute for sincere love for Christ and a heart to please Him.

This is not a comprehensive list; these are merely some practical guidelines that I have found to be helpful and would urge you to consider as you develop your own “hedges” for relationships and become accountable to God and others for maintaining them.

As a rule, the closer the working relationship with a married colleague of the opposite sex, the higher and more “inflexible” the hedges need to be.

Reduce Opportunities for Temptation or Accusation

- If it is necessary to meet alone, keep the door ajar or meet in a room with a window. Don’t meet in private places; be sure others are in the vicinity.
- Always have a third party if required to travel together. Don’t ride alone together in a vehicle.
- When traveling for business or ministry, stay on different floors of the hotel, unless he is accompanied by his wife.
- No meals together without a third party. (I realize that in many business settings, it is considered “standard practice” to meet, travel, or dine with members of the opposite sex. But I am convinced that is risky at best and foolish at worst. In our ministry, maintaining these particular hedges often requires inconvenience or additional expense. But it’s a small price to pay if you care about being above reproach morally, guarding your heart, protecting others’ marriages, and, above all, glorifying God.)
- Don’t flirt! Be careful about even “innocent” playfulness and teasing—especially when you are alone with each other. (He should have more “fun” with his wife than with any other woman!)
- Dress modestly. (Provocative clothing sends an invitation to a party you have no right to throw.)
- Keep your hands to yourself. Don’t invite, receive, or initiate intimate forms of physical contact (i.e., embracing, kissing, caressing, stroking, etc.).

Refuse to Participate in Conversations That May Damage Relationships

- Don't listen to him speak critically of his wife. Praise his wife to him and others. Never criticize her to him or to others.
- Don't provide a listening ear for him to share his marital difficulties or tensions at home.
- Don't confide personal or emotional concerns unless his wife or a third party is present.
- Avoid expressing admiration for physical characteristics, clothing, etc.
- Have a grateful spirit, but be discreet and restrained in offering verbal or written encouragement, even for godly characteristics. His need/desire for admiration should appropriately be fueled by his wife!
- Be discreet and restrained in expressing admiration for him to others.
- No secrets! Don't communicate anything to him (verbally or in writing) that you would not be comfortable with him sharing with his wife (unless you're planning a surprise birthday party for her!). Never ask that he refrain from sharing something with his wife.
- In written and verbal communication, include references to his wife (e.g., "How is _____ doing?" "Tell _____ I said 'hello.'" "I am so grateful for you and _____." "You and _____ have been on my heart.")

Respect Co-workers' Marriages and Family Relationships

- Don't establish a close working relationship, unless you know his wife and have a positive relationship with her. (I realize this may not be possible in some work environments. But I have found this an enormously helpful principle. The more closely you work with him, the more important this is.)
- Copy his wife on any email communication that relates to personal matters (including spiritual issues). (I can't emphasize this enough. Email can be an incredibly subtle avenue for inappropriate communication and cultivating "intimacy.")
- Don't call him at home unnecessarily. Be considerate—if his wife or a child answers the phone, take time to connect with them before asking to speak with him.
- Be sensitive to periods that he and his wife may not have had a lot of time together, and limit time spent working together accordingly. Exercise the same caution if you have reason to believe there may be tension or stress in his marriage.

- When with the couple, include her in the conversation. If discussing work-related matters, explain what you're talking about, so she doesn't feel left out or "in the dark."
- Show genuine interest in his wife and look for opportunities to bless, serve, and encourage her—birthdays, special occasions, needs you can meet, etc.
- Look for opportunities to minister to them as a couple (and family)—anniversaries, gifts for date nights, etc.
- Be a genuine and loving friend to his wife and children. Show an interest in what interests them.
- If his wife has any concerns or hesitations regarding his relationship with you, get out of the way! Request a transfer or quit your job if necessary. She may be overly-sensitive; she may be a "terrible wife." There may be "nothing going on" between you and her husband. Regardless, it is your responsibility to do everything in your power to encourage and protect their marriage. Do not let yourself become a wedge in his relationship with his wife—for any reason.

Respond to God's Spirit for Maximum Protection

- Don't allow a mental, emotional, or spiritual bond between you that is more intimate than what he has with his wife. Ask the Lord to prompt you when you are getting too close.
- Be accountable. Share your "hedges" with one or more close women friends who will commit to ask periodically whether you are maintaining them.
- If you find yourself being tempted mentally or emotionally, share with a mature, female confidant, for purposes of accountability. Don't wait until you're in trouble to reach out for help!
- If another believer expresses concern about your relationship with a married man, don't dismiss their caution. The wise person listens to and heeds counsel!
- Depend on the indwelling Spirit of God to guard your heart, direct your steps, and protect your relationships.

Making it Personal

Write a prayer responding to what you have just read.

- Express your commitment to be pure in your relationships with men (whether married or single).
- Ask God to show you what practical "hedges" need to be in place in your life and to give you grace to maintain those safeguards.

Remember that these “hedges” are not intended to be a burden, but a blessing—not to put you in *prison*, but to help *protect* you and others.

And remember that no list of “rules” can make you holy. Look to Christ—seek to love Him supremely. Be sensitive to the leading of His Spirit. Follow Him. Depend on His grace to guard your heart. *He* is the one who is able to “keep you from falling” (Jude 24).

*“I am convinced that he is able to guard until
that Day what has been entrusted to me. . . .
By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard
the good deposit entrusted to you.”
2 Timothy 1:12, 14*