

Boundaries in Relationships
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We have two more sermons in our sermon series entitled Relationships: A Mess Worth Making. In this series we've talked a lot about dying to self and forgiveness and putting others first. Today I'm going to present another side of relational truth in a message entitled Boundaries in Relationships.

We need to understand this or we can get out of balance to where we become door mats for abusive people to wipe their feet on. We need to understand when to say "yes" and when to say "no." Jesus said in Matthew 5:37 *Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No' be 'No'* – yet some Christians think it is never right to say no to anyone.

People without boundaries think we must always put up with abusive behavior. They are familiar with verses like Matthew 5:39 which says:

If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

That verse is basically about avoiding fights – but people with no boundaries take it to an extreme. I would say – Yes, in a heated moment turn the other cheek to avoid escalating it into something worse. But if a person hits you on a regular basis, stop getting close enough for them to take a swing at you. In other words – set a boundary! What is a boundary exactly?

1- Boundaries Defined

A boundary is a dividing line. In geography, boundaries show where one country ends and another country begins. Boundaries are like the property lines around a home. They show where my property ends and where yours begins. This is my property and that is not my property.

Personal boundaries are what define your identity. This is me — what I value, believe, need, or feel — and that is not me.

In relationships, boundaries show what defines one person from another so that we have separate identities and responsibilities. Boundaries create necessary space between individuals. Boundaries keep us from trying to control others and boundaries keep others from controlling us.

In the physical world, boundaries range from no trespassing signs to fences to walls to moats with alligators.

In relationships, boundaries range from a simple "no" to a restraining order. Boundaries are like fences to keep the good in and the bad out.

They guard our treasures so people will not steal them. For instance, our boundaries should be God's boundaries – and since God says to abstain from sex outside of marriage – you should be able to say no to someone trying to pressure you into a sexual relationship outside of marriage. People need to see their purity as a treasure to be protected. If someone does not respect your boundary, run from them as fast as you can.

Boundaries show who is responsible for what. I mow my yard on my side of the property line and you mow yours. Boundaries also show us what we are NOT responsible for – like other people.

Biblically – we are responsible TO others and FOR ourselves. What's the difference? We can see it clearly in two verses from Galatians 6. Verse 2 says:

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

But verse 5 says: *For each one should carry his own load.*

So which is it? Do we carry our own or do we carry each other's? Well – both. The word in verse 2 for burden means a load so heavy that you don't have the strength to carry it alone. In those times – we are responsible to help each other. But the word for load in verse 5 is different – it's a lighter load that you can carry on your own. Everyone should carry their own personal responsibilities.

Problems arise when people with heavy loads don't allow others to help. Problems also arise when people with light loads act like they should not have to carry their own weight and everyone else should do for them what they should be doing for themselves.

This includes children who expect parents to do their science project and co-workers who constantly need your help because they procrastinate. There are also many people who don't want to be responsible to work and pay their own bills. They always expect other people to bail them out. But the Bible says to set a boundary! Here's what the Message version of 2 Thessalonians 3:10-15 says:

Don't you remember the rule we had when we lived with you? "If you don't work, you don't eat." And now we're getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately — no excuses, no arguments — and earn their own keep. Friends, don't slack off in doing your duty. If anyone refuses to obey our clear command written in this letter, don't let him get by with it. Point out such a person and refuse to subsidize his freeloading. Maybe then he'll think twice. But don't treat him as an enemy. Sit him down and talk about the problem as someone who cares.

Wow! This shows us how to set boundaries in a biblical way. We should speak the truth in love.

We should point out the boundary that is being crossed and the consequences of continuing to do so. Then – if the person violates the boundary – allow them to suffer the consequences! That’s the hard part, but I want you to understand that:

2- Boundaries are Biblical

Even God sets boundaries. We see this in creation when God gave Adam and Eve boundaries. He told them they could not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they did, Genesis 3:23-24 says:

So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Now that’s a boundary! And notice – there are consequences for crossing God’s boundary. By the way, one of the words for sin in the Bible is trespass. We trespass by crossing lines God says don’t cross. We trespass by saying “yes” to what God says “no” to. We trespass by violating God’s boundaries.

God limits what He allows us to do. He confronts sin and allows consequences for behavior. He guards His house and will not allow evil things to go on there. He invites people in who will love Him, and He lets His love flow out to them at the same time. God sets boundaries on us and He respects our boundaries.

How does He do that? He allows us to choose whether we will follow Him or not. He allows us to experience the painful consequences of our behavior so that we will change. It hurts Him deeply when we don’t. But at the same time, He will not violate our wish to be left alone, although He will plead with us to come back to Him.

Second, he respects our no. He tries neither to control nor nag us. He allows us to say no and go our way and He keeps on loving us.

The Bible teaches that we should respect other people’s boundaries. Deuteronomy 19:14 says:

You shall not move your neighbor's boundary mark, which the ancestors have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the Lord your God gives you to possess.

God has designed the world so that boundaries are to be respected. He respects ours, and we need to respect His and other people’s.

Since boundaries are biblical and God sets boundaries – why do so many of us struggle with setting boundaries? Because of our:

3- Misbeliefs about Boundaries

Many sincere believers struggle with boundaries and raise good questions like:

1. Can I set limits and still be a loving person?
2. What if someone is upset by my boundaries?
3. Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?

Misinformation about the Bible's answers to these issues has led to much wrong teaching about boundaries.

Misbelief #1 - If I Set Boundaries, I'm Being Selfish and Unloving

It is true that we are commanded to love others. But loving others does not mean we allow them to continually hurt us. Loving others does not mean giving them everything they want. Loving others does not mean we never say no to them. Is it loving for a parent to never say NO to a child? NO! Love sets appropriate boundaries to protect the child.

For those who have trouble setting boundaries, it will seem selfish when you start setting boundaries. And people who want to violate your boundaries will try to make you feel guilty or selfish or unloving if you don't give in to their demands.

They will say things like:

How can you call yourself a Christian?

How can you hurt me this way?

How can you be so selfish?

But really – they are the ones only thinking about themselves and they desire to control you to get their own way! But you need to realize that no one can make you feel guilty without your permission. If you set a boundary and the other person doesn't accept it and withdraws or gets angry, then realize that is about them, not you.

Misbelief # 2 – If I set Boundaries, I Fear Upsetting Other People

Fear is a terrible reason to allow your boundaries to be trampled. If we are saying yes to people out of fear – that is not love. 1 John 4:18 says:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

- It is not loving to allow ourselves to be controlled by fear.
- It is not loving to allow other people to sin against us without consequences.

Some people genuinely believe in boundaries, but they are terrified of their consequences.

Is it possible that others will become angry at our boundaries and attack or withdraw from us? Absolutely. We can't control how others respond to our no. Some will welcome it; some will hate it.

But we must realize that boundaries are a "litmus test" for the quality of our relationships. The people who really love you will respect your boundaries. The people who turn on you or leave you never loved you.

Please recognize a hard truth: you can't make anyone love you. That's up to the other person in the relationship. Sometimes setting boundaries clarifies that the other person left the relationship a long time ago—in every way except physically.

Will some people abandon or attack us for having boundaries? Yes. Better to learn about their character now than live with it forever.

Misbelief #3 – If I set Boundaries, I Will Hurt Others

Appropriate boundaries do not control, attack or hurt anyone. Saying no to someone may cause them some temporary discomfort, but it will not cause them harm. In fact, it will ultimately help them if they respond correctly.

By the way, there's a difference between someone's feelings getting hurt and causing someone harm. Taking your kids for shots when they are sick will cause them pain, but it will ultimately heal them. Trying to prevent the temporary pain of the shot will do long-term harm.

If you are always trying to rescue people from their problems and pain – they will experience some pain when you stop. But you need to see that you are actually helping them, not hurting them. Don't allow their anger to control you.

By the way – as you develop boundaries you will have less anger in your own life. People with mature boundaries are the least angry people in the world! So – don't get angry, don't get even - set a boundary.

If you are constantly upset because you cook dinner and your family knows it's time to eat, but they always show up late – set a boundary. Let them know the time that dinner will be served and then eat at that time even if you eat alone at first. Put the leftovers in the fridge and when the others show up to eat – they can reheat it and clean up after themselves. They won't like it, but they will learn to show up on time or suffer the consequences.

In the early years of my ministry as a pastor, I felt guilty if I set boundaries. I thought I had to say yes to what people felt they needed from me. I tried to please people and make them happy — I never wanted anyone to be disappointed or upset with me. To me it seemed selfish or “not nice” to say no to people with hurts and needs. But as I studied the life of Christ – I saw that He set boundaries repeatedly.

Jesus had personal needs that He put priority on — sometimes even over the needs of other people — and He did so without feeling guilty. This meant He separated Himself from people when He needed to be alone.

Jesus told people “no.”

He said “no” to the rich young ruler.

He said “no” to people who were following Him just for free meals.

He set boundaries when praying for people by sending people with no faith out of the room.

He said “no” to those who wanted a miraculous sign in order to believe.

Boundaries are biblical and Christ-like!

4- Healthy Relationships Require Boundaries

Boundaries can be used in healthy ways or sinful ways. The way to know which boundaries are godly is to examine the motive. Are you protecting yourself or someone weaker from potential harm, either emotional or physical? If so, then you are setting healthy and needful boundaries. However, if you are maintaining distance simply because you desire to exclude someone or get back at someone, that is sinful.

Boundaries are about taking responsibility for our own lives. God gives us freedom to choose to live within His boundaries or outside of them, and to live outside of God’s boundaries means to accept the consequences. Living inside God’s boundaries brings blessing, and living outside of them brings destruction.

Boundaries limit destructive behaviors, and that is why both God and nations have laws and consequences for those who overstep those laws.

A healthy marriage requires boundaries. Marital boundaries keep sex and intimacy within the relationship while respecting each person’s needs. Violating these boundaries will quickly destroy trust.

Boundaries are also helpful in parenting. Setting healthy limits for children will protect them. Unhealthy boundaries tend to be controlling and selfishly motivated.

Learning boundaries as a child is important. It is more difficult to learn boundaries later in life. Children will not grow up to respect God’s boundaries or other people’s boundaries if they do not learn boundaries in their home.

A person with healthy boundaries takes responsibility for his own life and allows others to live theirs. The goal of boundaries is to make sacrifices for people when appropriate, but never in a destructive manner. We should be available for people in a crisis, but unavailable to selfish demands. In a godly relationship, both people are free to love each other and to be themselves because neither is using or manipulating the other.

Being Christ-like means we can say “no” in unselfish, helpful ways. Sometimes, love requires us to say “no” to those we love.

I spoke earlier about how God sets boundaries and I want to close by reminding you that God set the ultimate boundary. That boundary determines who will spend eternity in heaven with Him.

I know it’s popular today to think that everyone ends up in heaven, but Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14:

You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

The narrow gate is Jesus. There’s a boundary around heaven and only one way in: Jesus. God does not want anyone to perish – He wants everyone in heaven. But the way in is through the cross. The way in is through the blood of Christ. Many people think their good works will get them in – but God set a boundary that says “no” to works and “yes” to grace through faith.

God respects your boundaries and He will not force Himself into your life. God gives us the freedom to let Him in or shut Him out. In Revelation 3:20 Jesus said:

Look! I have been standing at the door, and I am constantly knocking. If anyone hears Me calling him and opens the door, I will come in and fellowship with him and he with Me.

Will you open the door of your heart to Jesus today?