

## Boundaries

Are you trying hard and it's not working? Do you expend lots of energy to have a successful life? How about people pleasing efforts, do they bring intimacy you need? Do you take responsibility for others and it doesn't work? Are you a master of taking care of feelings and problems of others? It sounds like it's time to take ownership of our own lives.

Back in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve about ownership: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen.1:28). We were created to take responsibilities for certain tasks. Part of taking responsibility, or ownership, is knowing what our job is, and what isn't. Workers who continually take on duties that aren't theirs will eventually burn out. It takes wisdom to know what we should be doing and what we shouldn't. Our inability to say no. We can't do everything.

In our desire to do the right thing, or to avoid conflict, we end up taking on problems that God never intended us to take on. Any confusion of responsibility and ownership in our lives is a problem of *boundaries*.

Many sincere, dedicated believers struggle with tremendous confusion about when it is biblically appropriate to set limits:

1. Can I set limits and still be a loving person?
2. What are legitimate boundaries?
3. What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries?
4. How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?
5. How do boundaries relate to submission?
6. Aren't boundaries selfish?

Misinformation about the Bible's answers to these issues has led to much wrong teaching about boundaries. Not only that, but many clinical psychological symptoms, such as depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, addictions, impulsive disorders, guilt problems, shame issues, panic disorders, and marital and relational struggles, find their root in conflicts with boundaries. We need a biblical view of what they are, what they protect, how they are developed, how they are injured, how to repair them and how to use them.

Physical boundaries mark a visible property line that someone holds the deed to. In the spiritual world, boundaries are just as real, but often harder to see. We need to define intangible boundaries and to recognize them as an ever-present reality that can increase your love and save your life. These boundaries define our soul, and help to guard it and maintain it.

*Proverbs 4:23 Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.*

A boundary shows us where we end and someone else begins, leading us to a sense of ownership. Knowing what we are to own and take responsibility for gives us freedom. Think how confusing it would be if someone told you to "guard this property diligently, because I will

hold you responsible for what happens here,” and then did not tell you the boundaries of the property. Or they did not give you the means with which to protect the property? This would be not only confusing but also potentially dangerous. Boundaries also show us what we are NOT responsible for. We are not, for example, responsible for other people. Nowhere are we commanded to have “other-control,” although we spend a lot of time and energy trying to get it!

The following verse shows our responsibility to one another. Many times others have “burdens” that are too big to bear. They do not have enough strength, resources, or knowledge to carry the load, and they need help. On the other hand each one should carry his own load.

*Galatians 6:2 Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (Literal translation): Work together to bear the responsibilities of the ministry [help alleviate each other's pressures], and so fulfill Christ's law [of love].*

The Greek work for the above burden means excess burden, or burdens that are so heavy that they weigh us down. Like boulders, they can crush us. It would break our backs. We need help with these, those times of crisis and tragedy in our lives.

*Galatians 6:4, 5*

*But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For every man shall bear his own burden. (Everyone must carry his own weight).*

Pull your own wagon. We take ownership of certain aspects of life that are our own “load.” This Greek word for this “burden” refers to cargo or the burden of daily toil. This work describes the everyday things we all need to do. These loads are like knapsacks, possible to carry. We are expected to deal with our own feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as the responsibilities God has given to each one of us, even though it takes effort.

If we don't set boundaries for the people who need to carry their own basic load we will continue to enable them and they will never learn and we will be burned out.

*Proverbs 19:19 A man of great wrath will have to take his punishment: for if you get him out of trouble you will have to do it again. (BBE, 1965 Bible in Basic English)*

People need to know there are consequences or they will not change.

Problems arise when people act as if their “boulders” are daily loads and refuse help, or as if their “daily loads” are boulders they shouldn't have to carry. The results of these two instances are either perpetual pain or irresponsibility.

We need to keep things that will nurture us inside our fences and keep things that will harm us outside. They guard our treasures so that people will not steal them. They keep the pearls inside, and the pigs outside.

*Matthew 7:6 Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.*

Sometimes, we have bad on the inside and good on the outside. In these instances, we need to be able to open up our boundaries to let the good in and the bad out. In other words, our fences need gates in them. If I find I have pain or broken fellowship, I need to open up and communicate it to God so that I can be healed.

*1John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Often we will close our boundaries to good things from others, staying in a state of deprivation. Boundaries are not walls. In every community, all members have their own space and property. The property lines need to be permeable enough to allow passing and strong enough to keep out danger.

Often if people had abuse while growing up, they keep bad in and good out. They close themselves off with the pain inside and not open up to get healed. In addition they allow others to “dump” more pain into their soul and they are “walled” off from support. They need fences strong enough to keep bad out and gates in fences to let out the bad already in their soul and let in the good they desperately need.

The concept of boundaries comes from the very nature of God. God defines Himself as a distinct, separate being, and is responsible for Himself. He defines and takes responsibility to let us know what He allows, likes, and dislikes. He defines Himself as separate from His creation and from us. He differentiates Himself from others. He tells us who He is and who He is not. He is love and not darkness. God also limits what He will allow in his yard. 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 to them at the same time.

An example of a boundary is our skin. It keeps the good in and the bad out. It protects your blood and bones, holding them on the inside and all together. It also keeps germs outside, protecting you from infection.

Victims of physical and sexual abuse often have a poor sense of boundaries. Early in life they were taught that their property did not really begin at their skin. Others could invade their property and do whatever they wanted. As a result, they have difficulty establishing boundaries later in life.

You can put up good protective fences with your words. The most basic is “no.” It lets others know that you exist apart from them and that you are in control of you. Being clear about your no – and your yes – is a theme that runs throughout the Bible.

*James 5:12 But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.*

“No” is a confrontational word. The Bible says that we are to confront people we love, saying, “No, that behavior is not okay.”

*Matt 18:15 - 20 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*

The Bible warns us against giving to others “reluctantly or under compulsion.”

*2 Corinthians 9:7 Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.*

People with poor boundaries struggle with saying no to the control, pressure, demands, and sometimes the real needs of others. They feel that if they say no to someone, they will endanger their relationship with that person, so they passively comply but inwardly resent. Sometimes a person is pressuring you to do something; other times the pressure comes from your own sense of what you “should” do. If you cannot say no to this external or internal pressure, you have lost control of your property and are not enjoying the fruit of “self-control.” It is difficult for people to know where you stand when you do not use words to define your property. Your words let people know where you stand and thus give them a sense of the “edges” that help identify you.

Satan is the great distorter of reality. Recall in the garden when he tempted Eve to question God’s boundaries and His truth. The consequences were disastrous. Consequences give some good “barbs” to fences. They let people know the seriousness of the trespass and the seriousness of our respect for ourselves.

There is always safety in the truth, whether it be knowing God’s truth or knowing truth about yourself.

We may be moved with compassion to give to someone in need, but then this person manipulates us into giving more than we want to give. We end up resentful and angry, having missed something we needed in our own life. Or, we may want more from someone else, and we pressure them until they give in.

Feelings should neither be ignored nor placed in charge. They can often motivate you to do much good. Feelings come from your heart and can tell you the state of your relationships.

They can tell you if things are going well, or if there is a problem. If you feel close and loving, things are probably going well. If you feel angry, you have a problem that needs to be addressed. But the point is, your feelings are your responsibility and you must own them and see them as your problem so you can begin to find an answer to whatever issue they are pointing to.

People with boundary problems usually have distorted attitudes about responsibility. They feel that to hold people responsible for their feelings, choices, and behaviors is mean. However, Proverbs repeatedly says that setting limits and accepting responsibility will save lives.

*Proverbs 13:18 Poverty and shame shall be to him that refuseth instruction: but he that regardeth reproof shall be honoured.*

*Proverbs 13:24 He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.*

Throughout the Scriptures, people are reminded of their choices and asked to take responsibility for them. Like Paul says, if we choose to live by the Spirit, we will live; if we choose to follow our sinful nature, we will die (Romans 8:13). Making decisions based on others' approval or on guilt breeds resentment, a product of our sinful nature. It's not love when we do things out of compulsion.

There are choices, values, limits, attitudes, and beliefs...we take responsibility for our own, this leads to the fruit of "self-control." We can have spaces inside ourselves where we can have a feeling, an impulse, or a desire, without acting it out. We need to be able to say NO to ourselves, including both our destructive desires and some good ones that are not wise to pursue at a given time.

The parable of the talents says that we are accountable—not to mention much happier—when we are exercising our gifts and being productive. It takes work, practice, learning, prayer, resources, and grace to overcome the fear of failure (Matt 25:23, 26-28). The servant wasn't chastised from being afraid; we can be afraid when trying something new and difficult. He was chastised for not confronting his fear.

*2 Corinthians 10:5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;*

1. We must own our own thoughts. Many people have not taken ownership of their own thinking processes. They are mechanically thinking the thoughts of others without ever examining them. They swallow others' opinions and reasoning's, never questioning and "thinking about their thinking." Certainly we should listen to the thoughts of others and weigh them; but we should never "give our minds" over to anyone. We are to weigh things for ourselves in the context of relationship, "sharpening" each other as iron, but remaining separate thinkers.

2. We must grow in knowledge and expand our minds. One area in which we need to grow is in knowledge of God and His Word. We learn much about God by studying His creation and His work. In learning about His world, we obey “rule & subdue” the earth and all that is within it. We must learn about the world that He has given us to become wise stewards. Whether we are doing brain surgery, balancing our checkbook, or raising children, we are to use our brains to have better lives and glorify God.
3. We must clarify distorted thinking. We all have a tendency to not see things clearly, to think and perceive in distorted ways. Probably the easiest distortions are in personal relationships. We rarely see people as they really are; our perceptions are distorted by past relationships and our own preconceptions of who we think they are, even the people we know best.

We need to make sure that we are communicating our thoughts to others.

*1 Corinthians 2:11 For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.*

What a great statement about boundaries. We have our own thoughts, and if we want others to know them, we must tell them.

**Compliant** people have fuzzy and indistinct boundaries; they “melt” into the demands and needs of other people. They can’t stand alone, distinct from people who want something from them. Compliers, for example, pretend to like restaurants and movies their friends do “just to get along.” They minimize their differences with others so as not to rock the boat. Compliers are chameleons. After a while it’s hard to distinguish them from their environment. The inability to say no to the bad is pervasive. Not only does it keep us from refusing evil in our lives, it often keeps us from recognizing evil. Their spiritual and emotional “radar” is broken; they have no ability to guard their hearts. This type of boundary problem paralyzes people’s “no” muscles. Whenever they need to protect themselves by saying no, the word catches in their throats. This happens for a number of different reasons:

- Fear of hurting the other person’s feelings
- Fear of abandonment and separateness
- A wish to be totally dependent on another
- Fear of someone else’s anger
- Fear of punishment
- Fear of being shamed
- Fear of being seen as bad or selfish
- Fear of being unspiritual
- Fear of one’s over strict, critical conscience

The last fear is actually experienced as guilt. People who have an over strict, critical conscience will condemn themselves for things God Himself doesn’t condemn them for.

When we give in to guilty feelings, we are complying with a harsh conscience. This fear of disobeying the harsh conscience translates into an inability to confront others—a saying yes to the bad—because it would cause more guilt.

Boundaries aren't inherited, they are built. From childhood on, it's an ongoing process. In our very early years, character is formed. Our deepest need is to belong, to be in a relationship, to have a spiritual and emotional "home." The very nature of God is to be in relationship: "God is love," says I John 4:16. Love means relationship—the caring, committed connection of one individual to another. It's not good for man to be alone. When the foundation is cracked or faulty in our attachments, relationships, boundaries become difficult to develop. We either set limits or risk losing a relationship or we don't set limits and remain a prisoner to the wishes of another.

**Controllers;** Aggressive and manipulative. The aggressive people don't listen to other's boundaries. They run over other people's fences like a tank. They are sometimes verbally abusive, sometimes physically abusive. But most of the time they simply aren't aware that others even have boundaries. They attempt to get others to change, to make the world fit their idea of the way life should be. The manipulative controllers are less honest than the aggressive ones. They try to persuade people out of their boundaries. They indirectly manipulate circumstances to get their way. They seduce other into carrying their burdens. They use guilt messages. They deny desire to control others; they brush aside their own self-centeredness. They are like the adulterous woman in Proverbs: "She eats and wipes her mouth and says, 'I've done nothing wrong'" (30:20).

Believe it or not, compliant and avoidant type people can also be controllers. They tend, however, to be more manipulative than aggressive. When they need emotional support, for example, they may do a favor for a friend. They hope that by being loving, they'll receive love. So then they wait, anticipating the return of the favor. And sometimes they wait for years. Especially if they performed the favor for someone who can't read minds. It's not a picture of love. The love of God is not self-seeking.

*1 Corinthians 13:5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;*

Caring for someone so that they'll care back for us is simply an indirect means of controlling someone else. If you've been on the "receiving" end of that kind of maneuver, you'll understand. One minute you've taken the compliment, or favor—the next minute you've hurt someone's feelings by not figuring out the price tag attached.

Controllers are undisciplined people. They have little ability to curb their impulses or desires. While it appears that they "get what they want in life," they are still slaves to their appetites. Delaying gratification is difficult for them. That's why they hate the word "no" from others.

Controllers also are limited in their ability to take responsibility for owning their lives. Having relied on bullying or indirectness, they can't function on their own in the world. The only remedy is to let controllers experience the consequences of their responsibility. They are isolated, people stay with them out of fear, guilt, or dependency. If they're honest, controllers rarely feel loved. Why? Because in their heart of hearts, they know that the only reason people spend time with them is because they are pulling the strings. If they stopped threatening or manipulating, they would be abandoned. "There is NO fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (I John 4:18). They can't terrorize or make others feel guilty and be loved by them at the same time.

### **Resolution of Boundary Problems**

- Identify the symptom
- Identify the conflict
- Identify the need that drives the conflict
- Take in and receive the good
- Practice boundary skills
- Say NO to the bad
- Forgive the aggressor. If you refuse to forgive someone, you still want something from that person, and even if it is revenge that you want, it keeps you tied to him forever.
- Respond, don't react
- Learn to love in freedom and responsibility, not in guilt

### **Victims**

Establishing boundaries for yourself is always hard. It will be especially difficult if your boundaries were severely violated in childhood. No one who has avoided childhood victimization can truly understand what these individuals go through. Of all the injuries that can be endured, this type causes severe spiritual and emotional damage.

A victim is a person who has, while in a helpless state, been injured by the exploitation of another. Some victimization is verbal, some is physical, some is sexual, and some is satanically ritualistic. All cause extreme damage to the character structure of a child, who then grows up to adulthood with spiritual, emotional, and cognitive distortions. In each case, however, three factors remain constant: helplessness, injury, and exploitation. The results: Depression, compulsive disorders, impulsive disorders, isolation, inability to trust others or form close attachments, inability to set limits, poor judgment in relationships, further exploitation in relationships, deep sense of pervasive badness, shame, guilt, chaotic lifestyle, sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness, unexplainable terror and panic attacks, phobias, rage attacks, and/or suicidal feelings and thoughts.



Victimization has long-lasting and far-reaching effects on the lives of adult survivors. Healing for victims is difficult because their development processes have been damaged or interrupted by abuse. The most primary damage done is that the victim loses a sense of trust. Trust, the ability to depend on ourselves and others in times of need, is a basic spiritual and emotional survival need. We need to be able to trust our own perceptions of reality and to be able to let significant people matter to us.

Boundary work as described can be extremely helpful in moving victims toward restoration and healing.

**My notes in closing:**

The mind of the believer can receive information either by the five senses or by the spirit. When the mind is fed by the five senses, it may eat of the words of life found in God's Word, or it may eat of the words of the world. Then, through the mind's reasoning processes, the individual makes decisions. Thoughts that are held by the mind and believed have a powerful effect on a person's life.

*John 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.*

The key to power for Christian believers is to be transformed, completely changed, by the renewing of their minds. To renew or change the mind, one must feed the mind with the proper thoughts.

*Matthew 4:2-4 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.*