



How to Progress your Life

Living in Lighting

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Common Boundary Myths.....	3
CHAPTER TWO: Our Needs Are Our Responsibility.....	5
CHAPTER THREE: Boundaries and Your Family.....	30
CHAPTER FOUR: Practice Boundary Skills.....	46
CHAPTER FIVE : Boundaries and Your Spouse.....	69
CHAPTER SIX: The Law of Sowing and Reaping.....	77

Chapter One

Common Boundary Myths

One of the definitions of a myth is a fiction that looks like a truth. Sometimes it sounds so true that Christians will believe it automatically. Some of these myths come from our family backgrounds. Some come from our church or theological foundations. And some come from our own misunderstandings. Whatever the source, prayerfully investigate the following “sounds-like-truths.”

Myth #1: If I Set Boundaries, I’m Being Selfish

“Now, wait a minute,” Teresa said, shaking her head. “How can I set limits on those who need me? Isn’t that living for me and not for God?”

Teresa was voicing one of the main objections to boundary setting for Christians: a deep-seated fear of being self-centered, interested only in one’s own concerns and not those of others.

It is absolutely true that we are to be a loving people. Concerned for the welfare of others. In fact, *the number-one hall-mark of Christians is that we love others* (John 13:35).

So don’t boundaries turn us from other-centeredness to self-centeredness? The answer is no. *Appropriate boundaries actually increase our ability to care about others.* People with highly developed limits are the most caring people on earth. How can this be true?

First, let's make a distinction between *selfishness* and *stewardship*. Selfishness has to do with a fixation on our own wishes and desires, to the exclusion of our responsibility to love others.

Though having wishes and desires is a God-given trait (Prov. 13:4), we are to keep them in line with healthy goals and responsibility.

For one thing, we may not *want* what we *need*. Mr. Insensitive may desperately need help with the fact that he's a terrible listener. But he may not want it. God is much more interested in meeting our needs than he is granting all our wishes. For example, he denied Paul's wish to heal his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

At the same time, he met Paul's needs to the point that Paul felt content and full: I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:12–13) It helps the Christian afraid of setting boundaries to know that God meets our needs. "God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). At the same time, God does not make our wishes and desires "all bad" either. He will meet many of them.

Chapter Two

Our Needs Are Our Responsibility

Even with God's help, however, it is crucial to understand that meeting our own needs is basically *our* job. We can't wait passively for others to take care of us. Jesus told us to "Ask. . .seek. . .knock" (Matt. 7:7). We are to "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). Even knowing that "it is God who works in [us]" (Phil. 2:13), we are our own responsibility.

This is a very different picture than many of us are used to. Some individuals see their needs as bad, selfish, and at best, a luxury. Others see them as something that God or others should do for them. But the biblical picture is clear: our lives are our responsibility.

At the end of our lives this truth becomes crystal clear. We will all "appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). A sobering thought.

Stewardship

A helpful way to understand setting limits is that our lives are a gift from God. Just as a store manager takes good care of a shop for the

owner, we are to do the same with our souls. If a lack of boundaries causes us to mismanage the store, the owner has a right to upset with us.

We are to develop our lives, abilities, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Our spiritual and emotional growth is God's "interest" on his investment in us. When we say no to people and activities that are hurtful to us, we are protecting God's investment. As you can see, there's quite a difference between selfishness and stewardship.

Myth #2: Boundaries Are a Sign of Disobedience

Many Christians fear that setting and keeping limits signals rebellion, or disobedience. In religious circles you'll often hear statements such as, "Your unwillingness to go along with our program shows an unresponsive heart." Because of this myth, countless individuals remain trapped in endless activities of no genuine spiritual and emotional value.

The truth is life-changing: a *lack* of boundaries is often a sign of disobedience. People who have shaky limits are often compliant on the outside, but rebellious and resentful on the inside. They would like to be able to say no, but are afraid. So they cover their fear with a half-hearted yes, as Barry did.

Barry had almost made it to his car after church when Ken caught up with him. *Here goes*, Barry thought. *Maybe I can still get out of this one.*

"Barry!" Ken boomed. "Glad I caught you!"

The singles class officer in charge of Bible studies, Ken was a dedicated recruiter to the studies he presided over; however, he was often insensitive to the fact that not everyone wanted to attend his meetings.

“So which study can I put you down for, Barry? The one on prophecy, evangelism, or Mark?” Barry thought desperately to himself. *I could say, “None of the above interest me. Don’t call me—I’ll call you.” But he’s a ranking officer in the singles class. He could jeopardize my relationships with others in the group. I wonder which class will be the shortest?*

“How about the one on prophecy?” Barry guessed. He was wrong.

“Great! We’ll be studying end times for the next eighteen months! See you Monday.” Ken walked off triumphantly.

Let’s take a look at what just happened. Barry avoided saying no to Ken. At first glance, it looks like he made a choice for obedience. He committed himself to a Bible study. That’s a good thing, right? Absolutely.

But take a second look. What were Barry’s motives for not saying no to Ken? What were the “thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12)? Fear. Barry was afraid of Ken’s political clout in the singles group. He feared that he would lose other relationships if he disappointed Ken.

Why is this important? Because it illustrates a biblical principle: *an internal no nullifies an external yes*. God is more concerned with our hearts than he is with our outward compliance. “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:6).

In other words, if we say yes to God or anyone else when we really mean no, we move into a position of *compliance*. And that is the same as lying. Our lips say yes, but our hearts (and often our half-hearted actions) say no. Do you really think Barry will finish out his year and a half with Ken’s Bible study? The odds are that some priority will arise to sabotage Barry’s commitment, and he’ll leave—but without telling Ken the real reason why.

Here’s a good way to look at this myth that boundaries are a sign of disobedience: *if we can’t say no, we can’t say yes*. Why is this? It has to do with our motivation to obey, to love, or to be responsible. We must always say yes out of a heart of love. When our motive is fear, we love not.

The Bible tells us how to be obedient: “Each of you must give as you have *made up your mind*, not *reluctantly* or *under compulsion*, for God loves a *cheerful giver*” (2 Cor. 9:7 NRSV, italics mine).

Look at the first two ways of giving: “reluctantly” and “under compulsion.” They both involve fear—either of a real person or a guilty conscience. These motives can’t exist side by side with love, because “there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18 NASB). Each of us must give as we have made up our minds. When we are afraid to say no, our yes is compromised.

God has no interest in our obeying out of fear “because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). God wants a response of love.

Are boundaries a sign of disobedience? They can be. We can say no to good things for wrong reasons. But having a “no” helps us to clarify, to be honest, to tell the truth about our motives; then we can allow God to work in us. This process cannot be accomplished in a fearful heart.

Myth #3: If I Begin Setting Boundaries, I Will Be Hurt by Others

Usually the quiet one in her women’s Bible study group, Debbie spoke up. The topic of the evening was “biblical conflict resolution,” and she couldn’t be silent another second. “I know how to present facts and arguments about my opinion in a caring way. But my husband will walk out on me if I start disagreeing! Now what do I do?”

Debbie’s problem is shared by many. She genuinely believes in boundaries, but she is terrified of their consequences.

Is it possible that others will become angry at our boundaries and attack or withdraw from us? Absolutely. God never gave us the power or the right to control how others respond to our no. Some will welcome it; some will hate it.

Jesus told the rich young man a hard truth about eternal life. He understood that the man worshiped money. So he told him to give it away—to make room in his heart for God. The results were not encouraging: “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth” (Matt. 19:22).

Jesus could have manipulated the situation so that it was less hard to swallow. He could have said, “Well, how about ninety percent?” After all, he’s God, and he makes up the rules! But he didn’t. He knew that the young man had to know whom to worship. So he let him walk away.

We can do no less. We can’t manipulate people into swallowing our boundaries by sugarcoating them. *Boundaries are a “litmus test” for the quality of our relationships.* Those people in our lives who can respect our boundaries will love our wills, our opinions, our separateness. Those who can’t respect our boundaries are telling us that they don’t love our no. They only love our yes, our compliance.

When Jesus said, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets” (Luke 6:26), he was saying, “Don’t be an ear tickler. Don’t be a chronic peacemaker.” If

everything you say is loved by everyone, the odds are good that you're bending the truth.

Setting limits has to do with telling the truth. The Bible clearly distinguishes between those who love truth and those who don't. First, there is the person who welcomes your boundaries. Who accepts them. Who listens to them. Who says, "I'm glad you have a separate opinion. It makes me a better person." This person is called *wise*, or *righteous*.

The second type hates limits. Resents your difference. Tries to manipulate you into giving up your treasures. Try our "litmus test" experiment with your significant relationships. Tell them no in some area. You'll either come out with increased intimacy— or learn that there was very little to begin with.

So what does Debbie, whose husband is an avowed "boundary buster," do? Will her husband carry out his threat to walk out on her? He might. We can't control the other person. But if the only thing keeping Debbie's husband home is her total compliance, is this a marriage at all? And how will problems ever be addressed when she and he avoid them?

Do Debbie's boundaries condemn her to a life of isolation? Absolutely not. If telling the truth causes someone to leave you, this gives the church an opportunity to provide support and a spiritual and emotional "home" to the abandoned person.

In no way are we advocating divorce. The point is that you can't make anyone stay with or love you. Ultimately that is up to your partner. Sometimes setting boundaries clarifies that you were left a long time ago, in every way, perhaps, except physically. Often, when a crisis like this occurs, it helps the struggling couple reconcile and remake their marriage into a more biblical one. The problem was raised, and now can be addressed. Warning: the boundary less spouse who develops limits begins changing in the marriage. There are more disagreements. There are more conflicts over values, schedules, money, kids, and sex. Quite often, however, the limits help the out-of-control spouse begin to experience the necessary pain that can motivate him or her to take more responsibility in the marriage. Many marriages are strengthened after boundaries are set because the spouse begins to miss the relationship.

Will some people abandon or attack us for having boundaries? Yes. Better to learn about their character and take steps to fix the problem than never to know.

Bonding First, Boundaries Second

Gina listened attentively to her counselor as he presented her boundary problems. "It all seems to make sense now," she said as she left the session. "I can see changes I'm going to have to make."

The next session was quite different. She entered the office defeated and hurt. "These boundaries aren't what they're cracked up to be," she

said sadly. “This week I confronted my husband, my kids, my parents, and my friends on how they don’t respect my boundaries. And now nobody will talk to me!”

What was the problem? Gina certainly jumped into her boundary work with both feet—but she neglected to find a safe place to work on boundaries. It isn’t wise to immediately alien-ate yourself from everyone important to you. Remember that you are made for relationship. You need people. You must have places where you are connected, where you are loved unconditionally. It’s only from that place of being “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph. 3:17 NASB) that you can safely begin learning to tell the truth. This is how you can prepare yourself for the resistance of others to your setting of biblical boundaries.

Myth #4: If I Set Boundaries, I Will Hurt Others

“The biggest problem with telling my mother no is the ‘hurt silence,’” Barbara said. “It lasts about forty-five seconds, and it always happens after I tell her I can’t visit her. It’s only broken by my apologizing for my selfishness and setting up a time to visit. Then she’s fine. I’ll do *anything* to avoid that silence.”

If you set boundaries, you fear that your limits will injure someone else—someone you would genuinely like to see happy and fulfilled:

- The friend who wants to borrow your car when you need it

- The relative in chronic financial straits who desperately asks for a loan
- The person who calls for support when you are in bad shape yourself

The problem is that sometimes *you see boundaries as an offensive weapon*. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Boundaries are a defensive tool*. Appropriate boundaries don't control, attack, or hurt anyone. They simply prevent your treasures from being taken at the wrong time. Saying no to adults, who are responsible for getting their own needs met, may cause some discomfort. They may have to look elsewhere. But it doesn't cause injury.

This principle doesn't speak only to those who would like to control or manipulate us. It also applies to the legitimate needs of others. Even when someone has a valid problem, there are times when we can't sacrifice for some reason or another. Jesus left the multitudes, for example, to be alone with his Father

(Matt. 14:22–23). In these instances, we have to allow others to take responsibility for their “knapsacks” (Gal. 6:5) and to look elsewhere to get their needs met.

This is a crucial point. We all need more than God and a best friend. We need a group of supportive relationships. The reason is simple: having more than one person in our lives allows our friends to be

human. To be busy. To be unavailable at times. To hurt and have problems of their own. To have time alone.

Then, when one person can't be there for us, there's another phone number to call. Another person who may have something to offer. And we aren't enslaved to the schedule conflicts of one person.

This is the beauty behind the Bible's teachings on the church, the body of Christ. We're all a group of lumpy, bumpy, unfinished sinners, who ask for help and give help, who ask again and give again. And when our supportive network is strong enough, we all help each other mature into what God intended us to be: "showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2–3).

When we've taken the responsibility to develop several supportive relationships in this biblical fashion, we can take a no from someone. Why? Because we have somewhere else to go.

Remember that God had no problem telling Paul that he would not take away his thorn. He tells all of us no quite often! God doesn't worry that his boundaries will injure us. He knows we are to take responsibility for our lives—and sometimes no helps us do just that.

Myth #5: Boundaries Mean That I Am Angry

Brenda had finally mustered up the courage to tell her boss she was no longer going to work weekends for no pay. She had asked for a meeting, which had gone well. Her boss had been understanding, and the situation was being ironed out. Every-thing had gone well, except inside Brenda.

It had begun innocently enough. Brenda had itemized her issues with the work situation and had presented her view and suggestions. But midway through her presentation, she'd been surprised by a sense of rage welling up inside. Her feeling of anger and injustice had been difficult to keep hidden. It had even slipped out in a couple of sarcastic comments about the boss's "golfing Fridays," comments that Brenda had had no intention of making.

Sitting at her desk, Brenda felt confused. Where had the anger come from? Was she "that kind of person"? Maybe the culprit was these boundaries she'd been setting.

It's no secret that quite often, when people begin telling the truth, setting limits, and taking responsibility, an "angry cloud" follows them around for a while. They become touchy and easily offended, and they discover a hair-trigger temper that frightens them. Friends will make comments like, "You're not the nice, loving person I used to know." The guilt and shame caused by these remarks can further confuse new boundary setters.

So do boundaries cause anger in us? Absolutely not. This myth is a misunderstanding of emotions in general, and anger specifically. Emotions, or feelings, have a function. They tell us something. They are a signal. Here are some of the things our “negative” emotions tell us. Fear tells us to move away from danger, to be careful. Sadness tells us that we’ve lost something—a relationship, an opportunity, or an idea. Anger is also a signal. Like fear, anger signals danger. However, rather than urging us to withdraw, anger is a sign that we need to move forward to confront the threat. Jesus’ rage at the defilement of the temple is an example of how this feeling functions (John 2:13–17).

Anger tells us that our boundaries have been violated. Much like a nation’s radar defense system, angry feelings serve as an “early warning system,” telling us we’re in danger of being injured or controlled.

“So that’s why I find myself hostile to pushy salesmen!” Carl exclaimed. He couldn’t understand why he had a hard time loving sales personnel who couldn’t hear his no. They were attempting to get inside his financial boundaries, and Carl’s anger was simply doing its job.

Anger also provides us with a sense of power to solve a problem. It energizes us to protect ourselves, those we love, and our principles. In fact, a common Old Testament illustration of an angry person is someone with a “hard-breathing nose.”¹ Imagine a bull in a ring, snorting and pawing, getting the steam up to attack, and you’ll get the

picture. However, as with all emotions, anger doesn't understand time. Anger doesn't dissipate automatically if the danger occurred two minutes ago—or twenty years ago! It has to be worked through appropriately. Otherwise, anger simply lives inside the heart.

This is why individuals with injured boundaries often are shocked by the rage they feel inside when they begin setting limits. This is generally not “new anger”—it's “old anger.” It's often years of that were never voiced, never respected, and never listened to. The protests against all the evil and violation of our souls sit inside us, waiting to tell their truths.

The Scriptures say that the earth quakes “under a slave when he becomes king” (Prov. 30:22). The only difference between a slave and a king is that one has *no choices* and the other has *all choices* available to him. When you suddenly give those who have been imprisoned all their lives a great deal of power, the result is often an angry tyrant. Years of constant boundary violations generate great anger.

It's very common for boundary-injured people to do some “catching up” with anger. They may have a season of looking at boundary violations of the past that they never realized existed.

Nathan's family was known in his small town as the ideal family. Other kids envied him growing up, saying, “You're lucky your parents are so close to you—mine couldn't care less about me.” Feeling a great

deal of gratitude for his close family, Nathan never noticed that his family carefully controlled differences and separateness. No one ever really disagreed or fought over values or feelings. “I always thought conflict meant a loss of love,” he would say.

It wasn't until Nathan's marriage began suffering that he began questioning his past. He naively married a woman who manipulated and controlled him. Several years into the marriage, he knew it was in serious trouble. But to Nathan's surprise, he was not only angry at himself for getting into this mess, but also at his parents for not equipping him with tools for handling life better.

Because he genuinely loved the warm family in which he was raised, Nathan felt guilty and disloyal when he remembered occasions in which his attempts to separate from his parents and set his own limits were constantly and lovingly frustrated. Mom would cry about his argumentativeness. Dad would tell Nathan not to upset his mom. And Nathan's boundaries remained immature and nonfunctional. The more clearly he saw what this had cost him, the angrier he felt. “I made my own choices in life,” he said. “But life would have been a lot better had they helped me learn to say no to people.”

Did Nathan remain angry at his parents forever? No, and neither do you have to. As hostile feelings surface, bring them to relationship. Confess them. The Bible tells us to tell the truth to each other about our

lacks, so that we may be healed (James 5:16). Experience the grace of God through others who love you in your anger. This is a first step toward resolving past anger.

A second step is to rebuild the injured parts of your soul. Take responsibility for healing the “treasures” that may have been violated. In Nathan’s case, his sense of personal autonomy and safety had been deeply wounded. He had to practice for a long time to regain this in his primary relationships. But the more he healed, the less anger he felt.

Finally, as you develop a sense of biblical boundaries, you develop more safety in the present. You develop more confidence. You are less enslaved to the fear of other people. In Nathan’s case, he set better limits with his wife and improved his marriage. As you develop better boundaries, you have less need for anger. This is because in many cases, anger was the only boundary you had.

Once you have your no intact, you no longer need the “rage signal.” You can see evil coming your way and prevent it from harming you by your boundaries. Don’t fear the rage you discover when you first begin your boundary development. It is the protest of earlier parts of your soul. Those parts need to be unveiled, understood, and loved by God and people. And then you need to take responsibility for healing them and developing better boundaries.

Boundaries Decrease Anger

This brings us to an important point about anger: The more biblical our boundaries are, the less anger we experience! Individuals with mature boundaries are the least angry people in the world. While those who are just beginning boundary work see their anger increase, this passes as boundaries grow and develop.

Why is this? Remember the “early warning system” function of anger. We feel it when we are violated. If you can prevent boundary violation in the first place, you don’t need the anger. You are more in control of your life and values.

Tina resented her husband’s coming home forty-five minutes late to dinner every night. She had a hard time keeping the food hot; the kids were hungry and crabby, and their evening study schedule was thrown off. Things changed, however, when she began serving dinner on time, with or without her husband. He came home to refrigerated leftovers that he had to reheat and eat alone. Three or four “sessions” like this prompted Tina’s husband to tear himself away from work earlier!

Tina’s boundary (eating with the kids on time) kept her from feeling violated and victimized. She got her needs met, the kids’ needs met, and she didn’t feel angry anymore. The old saying, “Don’t get mad. Just get even” isn’t accurate. It’s far better to say, “Don’t get mad. Set a limit!”

Myth #6: When Others Set Boundaries, It Injures Me

“Randy, I’m sorry, but I can’t lend you the money,” Pete said. “This is just a bad time for me.”

My best friend, Randy thought to himself. *I come to him in need, and he refuses me. What a blow! I guess that shows me what kind of friendship we really have.*

Randy is preparing to embark on a life of boundary lessness with others. Why? Because being on the “receiving end” was hurtful to him. He even made an emotional vow never to put anyone else through his experience.

Many of us are like Randy. Having someone say no to our request for support leaves a bad taste in our mouths. It feels hurtful, rejecting, or cold. It becomes difficult to conceive of setting limits as being helpful or good.

Having to accept the boundaries of others is certainly not pleasant. None of us enjoys hearing the word no. Let’s look at why accepting others’ boundaries is such a problem.

First, *having inappropriate boundaries set on us can injure us, especially in childhood.* A parent can hurt a child by not providing the correct amount of emotional connection at the appropriate time. Children’s emotional and psychological needs are primarily the responsibility of the parents. The younger the child, the fewer places he

or she can go to get those needs met. A self-centered, immature, or dependent parent can hurt a child by saying no at the wrong times.

Robert's earliest memories were of being in his crib, alone in the room, for hours at a time. His parents would simply leave him there, thinking he was fine if he wasn't crying. Actually, he had moved past crying to infant depression. Their no created a deep sense of being unwanted, which followed him into adulthood.

Second, *we project our own injuries onto others*. When we feel pain, one response is to “disown” the bad feeling and to throw it onto others. This is called *projection*. Quite often, people who have been hurt by inappropriate childhood boundaries will throw their fragility onto others. Sensing their own pain in others, they will avoid setting limits on others, as they imagine how devastating it would be to them.

Robert had extreme difficulty setting nighttime limits with his three-year-old daughter, Abby. Whenever she would cry about having to go to bed, he would panic inside, thinking, *I'm abandoning my daughter—she needs me and I'm not there for her*. Actually, he was a wonderful father, who read stories at night, prayed, and sang songs with his little girl. But he read his own pain in her tears. Robert's injuries kept him from setting the correct limits on Abby's wish to keep him singing songs and playing—until sunrise.

Third, *an inability to receive someone's boundary may mean there is an idolatrous relationship*. Kathy felt wounded and isolated when her husband wouldn't want to talk at night. His silence resulted in severe feelings of alienation. She began wondering if she were being injured by her husband's boundaries.

The real problem, however, lay in Kathy's dependence on her husband. Her emotional well-being rested on his being there for her at all times. He was to have provided everything that her own alcoholic parents hadn't. When he had a bad day and withdrew, her own day was a disaster.

Though we certainly need each other, no one but God is indispensable. When a conflict with one significant person can bring us to despair, it is possible that we are putting that person on a throne that should only be occupied by God. We should never see one other person as the only source of good in the world. It hurts our spiritual and emotional freedom, and our development.

Ask yourself: "If the person I can't hear no from were to die tonight, to whom would I go?" It's crucial to develop several deep, significant relationships. This allows those in our lives to feel free to say no to us without guilt because we have some-where else to go.

When we have a person we can't take no from, we have, in effect, handed over the control of our lives to them. All they have to do is

threaten withdrawal, and we will comply. This occurs quite often in marriages, where one spouse is kept in emotional blackmail by the other's threat to leave. Not only is this no way to live—it doesn't work, either. The controller continues withdrawing whenever he or she is displeased. And the boundary less person continues frantically scrambling to keep him or her happy. Dr. James Dobson's *Love Must Be Tough* is a classic work on this kind of boundary problem.²

Fourth, *an inability to accept others' boundaries can indicate a problem in taking responsibility*. Randy, who needed a loan from his best friend, is an example of this problem. He was making Pete responsible for his own financial woes.

Some people become so accustomed to others rescuing them that they begin to believe that their well-being is someone else's problem. They feel let down and unloved when they aren't bailed out. They fail to accept responsibility for their own lives.

Paul strongly confronted the Corinthians in a letter that has since been lost. He set limits on their rebelliousness. Thankfully, they responded well:

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made

sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. (2 Cor. 7:8–9)

The Corinthians took, accepted, and responded well to Paul’s boundaries, whatever they were. That’s a sign of taking responsibility.

It’s helpful to remember Jesus’ Golden Rule here: “In every-thing, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12). Apply it to setting limits. Do you want others to respect your boundaries? Then you must be willing to respect the boundaries of others.

Myth #7: Boundaries Cause Feelings of Guilt

Edward shook his head. “There’s something not right about all this for me,” he said. My folks were always so caring and concerned about me. It’s been such a great relationship. And then...” He paused, groping for words.

“And then I met Judy and we got married. And that was wonderful. We saw my folks every week, sometimes more. Then the kids came along. Everything was fine. Until I got the job offer from across the country. It was the position of my dreams—Judy was excited about it,

“But as soon as I told my parents about the offer, things changed. I started hearing them talk about Dad’s health—I

hadn't realized it was that bad. About Mom's loneliness—about how we were the only bright spots in their lives. And about all the sacrifices they'd made for me.

“What do I do? They're right. . .they've given their lives to me. How can I leave them after all that?”

Edward isn't alone in his dilemma. One of the major obstacles to setting boundaries with others in our lives is our feelings of obligation. What do we owe not only our parents, but anyone who's been loving toward us? What's appropriate and biblical, and what isn't?

Many individuals solve this dilemma by avoiding boundary setting with those to whom they feel an obligation. In this sense, they can avoid the guilty feelings that occur when they say no to someone who has been kind to them. They never leave home, never change schools or churches, and never switch jobs or friends. Even when it would be an otherwise mature move.

The idea is that *because we have received something, we owe something*. The problem is the nonexistent debt. The love we receive, or money, or time—or anything which causes us to feel obligated—should be accepted as a gift.

“Gift” implies no strings attached. All that's really needed is gratitude. The giver has no second thought that the present will provide a

return. It was simply provided because someone loved someone and wanted to do something for him or her. Period.

That is how God views his gift of salvation to us. It cost him his Son. It was motivated out of love for us. And our response is to receive it, and to be grateful. Why is gratitude so important? Because God knows that our gratitude for what he has done for us will move us to love others: “as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Col. 2:7).

What do we owe those who are kind to us, who have genuinely cared for us? We owe them thanks. And from our grateful heart, we should go out and help others.

We need to distinguish here between those who “give to get” and those who truly give selflessly. It’s generally easy to tell the difference. If the giver is hurt or angered by a sincere thanks, the gift was probably a loan. If the gratitude is enough, you probably received a legitimate gift with no feelings of guilt attached. God does an instructive job of keeping the issue of gratitude and boundaries separate. In Revelation’s letters to the seven churches, he singles out three churches (Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira):

1. He praises their accomplishments (gratitude).
2. He then tells them that even so, he has “something against” them (2:4, 14, 20).
3. He finally confronts their irresponsibility (boundaries).

He doesn't allow the two issues to be confused. Neither should we.

Myth #8: Boundaries Are Permanent, and I'm Afraid of Burning

My Bridges

“But what if I change my mind?” Carla asked. “I’m scared that I’ll set a boundary with my best friend, and then she’ll leave and forget about me.”

It’s important to understand that your no is always subject to you. You own your boundaries. They don’t own you. If you set limits with someone, and she responds maturely and lovingly, you can renegotiate the boundary. In addition, you can change the boundary if you are in a safer place.

Changing and renegotiating boundaries has many biblical precedents: God chose not to destroy Nineveh, for example, when the city repented (Jonah 3:10). In addition, Paul rejected John Mark for a mission trip because the younger man had deserted Paul (Acts 15:37–39). Yet, years later, Paul requested John Mark’s companionship (2 Tim. 4:11). The timing was ripe to change his boundary.

As you’ve probably noticed, some of these myths are genuine misconceptions you may have learned from distorted teachings. Yet others simply result from the fear of standing up and saying no to unbiblical responsibility.

Prayerfully review which myths have entangled and ensnared you. Search the Scripture mentioned in this chapter. And ask God to give you a sense of confidence, he believes in good boundaries more than you do.

Chapter Three

Boundaries and Your Family

Susie had a problem that I had seen countless times before. This thirty-year-old woman would return from a visit to her parents' home and suffer a deep depression.

When she described her problem to me, I asked her if she noticed that every time she went home to visit, she came back extremely depressed.

“Why that’s ridiculous,” she said. “I don’t live there anymore. How could the trip affect me this way?”

When I asked her to describe the trip, Susie told of social gatherings with old friends and family times around the dinner table. These were fun, she said, especially when it was only family. “What do you mean ‘only family’?” I asked. “Well, other times my parents would invite some of my friends over, and I didn’t like those dinners as well.” “Why was that?” Susie thought for a minute and then replied, “I guess I start to feel guilty.” She began to recount the subtle remarks her parents would make comparing her friends’ lives to hers.

They would talk of how wonderful it is for grandparents to have a “hands on” role in raising the children. They would talk of the community activities her friends were doing and how wonderful she would be at those activities if she only lived there. The list went on and on. Susie soon discovered that, when she returned home, she felt as if she were bad for living where she lived. She had a nagging sense that she really should do what her parents wanted her to do.

Susie had a common problem. She had made choices *on the outside*. She had moved away from the family she grew up in to pursue a career on her own. She had been paying her own bills. She had even gotten married and had a child. But *on the inside*, things were different. She did not have emotional permission to be a separate person, make free choices about her life, and not feel guilty when she did not do what her parents wanted. She could still yield to pressure.

The real problem is on the inside. Remember, boundaries define someone’s property. Susie, and others like her, do not really “own” themselves. People who own their lives do not feel guilty when they make choices about where they are going. They take other people into consideration, but when they make choices for the wishes of others, they are choosing out of love, not guilt; to advance a good, not to avoid being bad.

Signs of a Lack of Boundaries

Let's look at some common signs of a lack of boundaries with the family we grew up in.

Catching the Virus

A common scenario is this: one spouse doesn't have good emotional boundaries with the family he grew up in—his family of origin. Then when he has contact with them by phone or in person, he becomes depressed, argumentative, self-critical, perfectionist, angry, combative, or withdrawn. It is as though he “catches” something from his family of origin and passes it on to his immediate family.

His family of origin has the power to affect his new family in a trickle-down effect. One sure sign of boundary problems is when your relationship with one person has the power to affect your relationships with others. You are giving one person way too much power in your life.

I remember one young woman who made steady gains in therapy until she talked to her mother, when she would withdraw for three weeks. She would say things like, “I'm not changing at all. I'm not getting any better.” Fusing with many of her mother's ideas about her, she wasn't able to stay separate. This fusion with her mother affected her other relationships. She virtually shut everyone out of her life after an interaction with her mother. Her mother owned her life; she was not her own.

Second Fiddle

“You wouldn’t believe how she is with him,” Dan said. “She totally focuses on his every wish. When he criticizes her, she tries harder. And she practically ignores me. I’m tired of being the ‘second man’ in her life.”

Dan wasn’t talking about Jane’s lover. He was talking about her father. Dan was tired of feeling like Jane cared more about her father’s wishes than his.

This is a common sign of a lack of boundaries with the family of origin: the spouse feels like he gets leftovers. He feels as if his mate’s real allegiance is to her parents. This spouse hasn’t completed the “leaving before cleaving” process; she has a boundary problem. God has designed the process whereby a “man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24 NASB). The Hebrew word for “leave” comes from a root word that means to “loosen,” or to relinquish or forsake. For marriage to work, the spouse needs to loosen her ties with her family of origin and forge new ones with the new family she is creating through marriage.

This does not mean that husbands and wives shouldn’t have a relationship with their extended families. But they do need to set clear boundaries with their families of origin. Many marriages fail because one partner fails to set clear boundaries with the family of origin, and the spouse and children get leftovers.

May I Have My Allowance, Please?

Terry and Sherry were an attractive couple. They owned a big house and went on lavish vacations; their children took piano lessons and ballet, and they had their own skis, roller blades, ice skates, and wind surfers. Terry and Sherry had all the trappings of success. But, there was one problem. This lifestyle was not supported by Terry's paycheck. Terry and Sherry received much financial help from his family.

Terry's family had always wanted the best for him, and they had always helped him get it. They had contributed to the house, the vacations, and the children's hobbies. While this allowed Terry and Sherry to have things they could not otherwise have, it cost them dearly as well.

The periodic bailouts from his parents cut into Terry's self-respect. And Sherry felt as if she couldn't spend any money without consulting her in-laws, since they contributed the funds.

Terry illustrates a common boundary problem for young adults today, both married and single: he was not yet an adult financially. He could not set boundaries on his parents' desire for him and Sherry to "have everything we have." He also found that he had so fused with their ideas of success that he had trouble saying no to these wishes in himself. He wasn't sure he wanted to forsake the gifts and handouts for a greater sense of independence.

Terry's story is the "up" side of the financial boundary problem. There is also the "I'm in trouble" side. Many adult children perpetually get into financial messes because of irresponsibility, drug or alcohol use, out-of-control spending, or the modern "I haven't found my niche" syndrome. Their parents continue to finance this road of failure and irresponsibility, thinking that "this time they'll do better." In reality, they are crippling their children for life, preventing them from achieving independence.

An adult who does not stand on his own financially is still a child. To be an adult, you must live within your means and pay for your own failures.

Mom, Where Are My Socks?

In the *perpetual child syndrome*, a person may be financially on his own, but allows his family of origin to perform certain life management functions.

This adult child often hangs out at Mom and Dad's house, vacations with them, drops off laundry, and eats many meals there. He is Mom or Dad's closest confidant, sharing "every-thing" with them. At thirty something, he hasn't found his career niche, and he has no savings, no retirement plan, and no health insurance. On the surface these things do not appear to be serious problems. But often, Mom and Dad are symbolically keeping their adult child from emotionally leaving home.

This often happens in friendly, loving families, where things are so nice it's hard to leave. (Psychologists often refer to this as the "enmeshed family," one in which the children do not separate with clear boundaries.) It does not look like a problem, because everyone gets along so well. The family is very happy with one another.

However, the adult children's *other* adult relationships may be dysfunctional. They may choose "black sheep" friends and lovers. They may be unable to commit to a member of the opposite sex or to a career.

Often their finances are a problem. They have large and multiple credit-card balances and usually are behind on their taxes. Although they may be earning their own way daily, they never think about the future. This is essentially an adolescent financial life. Adolescents make enough money to buy a surf-board, stereo, or dress, but do not think past the immediate pre-sent to the future. Did I make enough money for the pleasures of this weekend? Adolescents—and adult children who have not separated from their parents—are still under parental protection, and it's a parent's job to think about the future.

Three's a Crowd

Dysfunctional families are known for a certain type of boundary problem called *triangulation*. It goes something like this: Person A is angry at Person B. Person A does not tell Person B. Person A calls

Person C and gripes about Person B. Person C enjoys Person A's confidence and listens whenever A wants to play the triangle game.

By this time, Person B, feeling lonely, calls C, and, in passing, mentions the conflict with A. Person C becomes the confidant of B as well as A. Persons A and B have not resolved their conflict, and C has two "friends."

Triangulation is the failure to resolve a conflict between two persons and the pulling in of a third to take sides. This is a boundary problem because the third person has no business in the conflict, but *is used for comfort and validation by the ones who are afraid to confront each other*. This is how conflicts persist, people don't change, and enemies are made unnecessarily.

What happens in the triangle is that people speak falsely, covering up their hatred with nice words and flattery. Person A is usually very cordial, nice, and even complimentary to B in person, but when A talks to C, the anger comes out.

This is a clear lack of boundaries because Person A is not "owning" his anger. The person with whom A is angry deserves to hear it straight from him. How many times have you been hurt by a "Do you know what John said about you?" And the last time you talked to John things were fine. In addition, Person C is being drawn into the conflict and his knowledge of the conflict gets in the way of his relationship with Person

B. Gossip gets between people. It affects our opinions of the people being gossiped about without their having a chance to defend themselves. Many times what we hear from a third person is inaccurate. This is why the Bible commands us to listen to at least two or three witnesses, not just one.

Triangulation is a common boundary problem with families of origin. Old patterns of conflict between a parent and a child, or between two parents, result in one family member calling another family member and talking about the third family member. These extremely destructive patterns keep people dysfunctional.

The Scripture is very serious about dealing with conflict *directly* with the one you are angry with: He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue. (Prov. 28:23)

Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. (Lev. 19:17)

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23–24)

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. (Matt. 18:15)

These Scriptures show that a simple way to avoid triangulation is to always talk to the person with whom you have a conflict first. Work it out with her, and only if she denies the problem, talk to someone else to get insight about how to resolve it, not to gossip and to bleed off anger. Then you *both* go to talk to her together to try to solve the problem.

Never say to a third party something about someone that you do not plan to say to the person himself.

Who's the Child Here, Anyway?

“Children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children” (2 Cor. 12:14).

Some people were born to take care of their parents. They did not sign up for this duty; they inherited it. Today we call these people “codependent.” Early in life they learned they were responsible for their parents, who were stuck in childish patterns of irresponsibility. When they became adults, they had a difficult time setting boundaries between themselves and their irresponsible parents. Every time they tried to have separate lives, they felt selfish.

Indeed, the Bible teaches that adult children should take care of their elderly parents. “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grand-children, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own

family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God” (1 Tim. 5:3–4).

It is good to feel grateful to our parents and to repay them for what they have done for us. But two problems generally crop up. First, your parents may not be “really in need.” They may be irresponsible, demanding, or acting like martyrs. They may need to take responsibility for their own knapsacks.

Second, when they are “really in need,” you may not have clear boundaries to determine what you can give and what you can’t give. You may not be able to limit your giving, and your parents’ inability to adjust to old age, for example, will dominate your family. Such domination can ruin marriages and hurt children. A family needs to decide what they want to give and what they do not want to give, so they will continue to love and appreciate the parent, and not grow resentful.

Good boundaries prevent resentment. *It is good to give.* Make sure, however, that it is the proper amount for your situation and resources.

But I’m Your Brother

Another frequent dynamic is the grown sibling relationship. An irresponsible adult child depends on a responsible adult sibling to avoid growing up and leaving the family. (We are not talking about a true needy sibling who has a mental or physical impairment.) The

irresponsible child continues to play old family games well into adulthood.

The tough issue here is the guilt and pressure you feel because it is your brother or sister. I have seen people do totally crazy and unhelpful things for a brother or sister that they would never do for their closest friend. Our families can tear down our best-built fences because they are “family.”

But Why Do We Do That?

Why in the world do we choose to continue these sorts of patterns? What is wrong?

One reason is that we did not learn the laws of boundaries in our family of origin, and our adult boundary problems are actually old boundary problems that have been there since childhood.

Another reason is that we may not have gone through the biblical transition into adulthood and the spiritual adoption into the family of God. Let's look at both.

Continuation of Old Boundary Problems

Remember the story about the alien? He had grown up on another planet and was unfamiliar with the laws of Earth, such as gravity and money as a medium of exchange.

The patterns you learn at home growing up are continued into adulthood with the same players: lack of consequences for irresponsible behavior, lack of confrontation, lack of limits, taking responsibility for others instead of yourself, giving out of compulsion and resentment, envy, passivity, and secrecy. These patterns are not new, they have just never been confronted and repented of.

These patterns run deep. Your family members are the ones you learned to organize your life around, so they are able to send you back to old patterns by their very presence. You begin to act automatically out of *memory* instead of growth.

To change, you must identify these “sins of the family” and turn from them. You must confess them as sins, repent of them, and change the way you handle them. The first step in establishing boundaries is becoming aware of old family patterns that you are still continuing in the present.

Look at the struggles you are having with boundaries in your family of origin, identify which laws are being broken, and then pinpoint the resulting negative fruit in your life.

Adoption

This is not a book about spiritual development, but boundaries are an essential aspect of growing up. One step in growing up is coming out

from under parental authority and putting yourself under God's authority.

The Bible says that children are *under* the authority of their parents until they become adults (Gal. 4:1–7). In a real sense their parents are responsible for them. But when adulthood and the “age of accountability” comes, that person comes out from under guardians and managers and becomes responsible for him or herself. Christians move into another parental relationship with God as Father. God does not leave us as orphans, but takes us into his family.

Numerous New Testament passages teach that we need to forsake our allegiance to our original family and become adopted by God (Matt. 23:9). God commands us to look to him as our father and to have no parental intermediaries. Adults who are still holding an allegiance to earthly parents have not realized their new adoptive status.

Many times we are not obeying the Word of God because we have not spiritually left home. We feel we still need to please our parents and their traditional ways of doing things rather than obey our new Father (Matt. 15:1–6). When we become part of God's family, obeying his ways will sometimes cause conflict in our families and sometimes separate us (Matt. 10:35–37). Jesus says that our spiritual ties are the closest and most important (Matt. 12:46–50). Our true family is the family of God. In this family, which is to be our strongest tie, things are

done a certain way. We are to tell the truth, set limits, take and require responsibility, confront each other, forgive each other, and so on. Strong standards and values make this family run. And God will not allow it any other way in his family.

This in no way means that we are to cut other ties. We are to have friends outside of God's family and strong ties with our family of origin. However, we need to ask two questions: Do these ties keep us from doing the right thing in any situation? and Have we really become an adult in relation to our family of origin?

If our ties are truly loving, we will be separate and free and give out of love and a "purposeful" heart. We will stay away from resentment, we will love with limits, and we will not enable evil behavior.

If we are not "under guardians and managers" as adults, we can make truly *adult* decisions, having control over our own will (1 Cor. 7:37), subject to our true Father.

Resolution of Boundary Problems with Family

Establishing boundaries with families of origin is a tough task, but one with great reward. It is a process, with certain distinguishable steps.

Identify the Symptom

Look at your own life situation and see where boundary problems exist with your parents and siblings. The basic question is this: *Where*

have you lost control of your property? Identify those areas and see their connection with the family you grew up in, and you are on your way.

Identify the Conflict

Discover what dynamic is being played out. For example, what “law of boundaries” are you violating? Do you triangulate? Do you take responsibility *for* a sibling or parent instead of being responsible *to* them? Do you fail to enforce consequences and end up paying for their behavior? Are you passive and reactive toward them and the conflict?

You cannot stop acting out a dynamic until you understand what you are doing. “Take the log out” of your own eye. Then, you will be able to see clearly to deal with your family members. See yourself as the problem and find your boundary violations.

Identify the Need That Drives the Conflict

You do not act in inappropriate ways for no reason. You are often trying to meet some underlying need that your family of origin did not meet. Maybe we are still entangled because of a need to be loved, or approved of, or accepted. You must face this deficit and accept that it can only be met in your new family of God, those who are now your true “mother, father, brothers, and sisters,” those who do God’s will and can love you the way he designed.

Take in and Receive the Good

It is not enough to understand your need. *You must get it met.* God is willing to meet your needs through his people, but you must humble yourself, reach out to a good support system, and take in the good. Do not continue to hide your talent in the ground and expect to get better. Learn to respond to and receive love, even if you're clumsy at first.

Chapter four

Practice Boundary Skills

Your boundary skills are fragile and new. You can't take them immediately into a difficult situation. Practice them in situations where they will be honored and respected. Begin saying no to people in your supportive group who will love and respect your boundaries.

When you are recovering from a physical injury, you do not pick up the heaviest weight first. You build up to the heavy stuff. Look at it as you would physical therapy.

Say No to the Bad

In addition to practicing new skills in safe situations, avoid hurtful situations. When you are in the beginning stages of recovery, you need to avoid people who have abused and controlled you in the past.

When you think you are ready to reestablish a relationship with someone who has been abusive and controlling in the past, bring a friend or supporter along. Be aware of your pull toward hurtful situations and

relationships. The injury you are recovering from is serious, and you can't reestablish a relationship until you have the proper tools. Be careful to not get sucked into a controlling situation again because your wish for reconciliation is so strong.

Forgive the Aggressor

Nothing clarifies boundaries more than forgiveness. To for-give someone means to let him off the hook, or to cancel a debt he owes you. When 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.*

Refusing to forgive a family member is one of the main reasons people are stuck for years, unable to separate from their dysfunctional families. They still want something from them. It is much better to receive grace from God, who has something to give, and to forgive those who have no money to pay their debt with. This ends your suffering, because it ends the wish for repayment that is never forthcoming and that makes your heart sick because your hope is deferred (Prov. 13:12).

If you do not forgive, you are demanding something your offender does not choose to give, even if it is only confession of what he did. This "ties" him to you and ruins boundaries. Let the dysfunctional family you came from go. Cut it loose, and you will be free.

Respond, Don't React

When you *react* to something that someone says or does, you may have a problem with boundaries. If someone is able to cause havoc by doing or saying something, she is in control of you at that point, and your boundaries are lost. When you *respond*, you remain in control, with options and choices.

If you feel yourself reacting, step away and regain control of yourself so family members can't force you to do or say something you do not want to do or say and something that violates your separateness. When you have kept your boundaries, choose the best option. The difference between responding and reacting is choice. When you are reacting, *they* are in control. When you respond, *you* are.

Learn to Love in Freedom and Responsibility, Not in Guilt

The best boundaries are loving ones. The person who has to remain forever in a protective mode is losing out on love and freedom. Boundaries in no way mean to stop loving. They mean the opposite: you are gaining freedom to love. It is good to sacrifice and deny yourself for the sake of others. But you need boundaries to make that choice.

Practice purposeful giving to increase your freedom. Sometimes people who are building boundaries feel that to do someone a favor is codependent. Nothing is farther from the truth. Doing good for someone,

when you freely choose to do it, is boundary enhancing. Codependents are not doing good; they are allowing evil because they are afraid

Boundaries and Your Friends

Marsha switched on the television, not even noticing which show was on. She was thinking about her phone call with her best friend, Tammy. She had asked Tammy to go to a movie

with her. Tammy had had other plans for the evening. Once again, Marsha had taken the initiative. Once again, she was disappointed. Tammy never called her. Was this what friendship was supposed to be about?

Friendship. The word conjures up images of intimacy, fondness, and a mutual drawing together of two people. Friends are symbols of how meaningful our lives have been. The saddest people on earth are those who end their days with no relationships in which they are truly known and truly loved.

Friendship can be a broad category; most of the relationships mentioned in this book have friendship components. But for our purposes, let's define friendship as *a nonromantic relationship that is attachment-based rather than function-based.* In other words, let's exclude relationships based on a common task, like work or ministry. Let's look at friendship as comprising people we want to be around just for their own sake.

Boundary conflicts with friends come in all sizes and shapes. To understand the various issues, let's look at a few conflicts and how they can be resolved with boundaries.

Conflict #1: Compliant/Compliant

In some ways it was a great friendship; in other ways, it was awful. Sean and Tim enjoyed the same sports, activities, and recreation. They went to the same church and liked the same restaurants. But they were just too nice to each other. They both had difficulty saying no to each other.

Their realization of the problem came up one weekend when a white-water rafting trip and a sixties concert were scheduled on the same day. Sean and Tim enjoyed both activities, but they couldn't do both. Sean called Tim, suggesting they go rafting. "Absolutely," answered his friend. However, unbeknownst to each other, neither Sean nor Tim really wanted to go rafting. In their heart of hearts, both men had been looking forward to going to the concert.

Halfway down the river, Sean and Tim got honest with each other. Tired and wet, Tim blurted out, "It was your big idea to come on this trip." "Tim," Sean said with surprise. "I thought *you* wanted to go rafting."

“Oh, no! Since you called me, I figured that’s what *you* wanted! Old buddy,” he continued ruefully, “maybe it’s time we stopped treating each other like china dolls.”

The result of two complaints’ interacting is that neither does what he really wants. Each is so afraid of telling the other the truth that neither ever does. Let’s apply a boundary checklist to this conflict. This checklist of questions will not only help you locate where you are in setting boundaries, but also show you how to get where you want to go.

1. *What are the symptoms?* One symptom of a compliant/ compliant conflict is dissatisfaction—a sense that you allowed something you shouldn’t have.

2. *What are the roots?* Complaints come from backgrounds where they had to avoid saying no to keep others happy. Since their roots are similar, it’s often hard for two compliant people to help each other.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* Compliant people politely deny their own boundaries to keep the peace.

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* Each compliant needs to take responsibility for his or her attempts to appease or please the other. Sean and Tim both need to admit that they each control the other by being nice.

5. *What do they need?* Compliant people need to have supportive relationships to plug into, be they support groups, home Bible studies, or

counselors. Their fear of hurting the other person makes it difficult for them to set boundaries on their own.

6. *How do they begin?* Both complaints practice setting limits on trivial things. They may begin with being honest about things like tastes in restaurants, church liturgies, music, and the like.

7. *How do they set boundaries with each other?* Sean and Tim talk with each other face-to-face, finally telling the truth and revealing limits they'd like to start setting. They commit themselves to better boundaries with each other.

8. *What happens next?* Sean and Tim may have to admit that their interests are not as similar as they'd thought. They may need to separate more from each other. Having different friends for different activities is no blot on the relationship; it might help their friendship in the long run.

Conflict #2: Compliant/Aggressive Controller

The compliant/aggressive controller conflict, the most identifiable of friendship conflicts, has classic symptoms. The compliant feels intimidated and inferior in the relationship; the aggressive controller feels irritated at being nagged by the compliant. "Well, all right, if you insist" is a catchphrase of the compliant. Usually, the aggressive controller is insisting on using some of the compliant's time, talents, or treasures. The aggressive controller has no problem demanding what she wants. Some-times she just takes what she wants without asking. "I

needed it” is enough reason for the aggressive controller to help herself to whatever the compliant has, be it car keys, a cup of sugar, or three hours of time.

Since the compliant is usually unhappy in this relationship, he is the one who needs to take action. Let’s put this relationship through the boundary checklist:

What are the symptoms? The compliant feels controlled and resentful; the aggressive controller feels good, except she doesn’t like to be nagged.

2. *What are the roots?* The compliant probably grew up in a family who taught him to avoid conflict, rather than embrace it. The aggressive controller never received training in delaying gratification and in taking responsibility for herself.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* Two specific boundary conflicts are the inability of the compliant to set clear limits with his friend, and the inability of the aggressive controller to respect the compliant’s limits.

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* The compliant needs to see that he isn’t a victim of the aggressive controller; he is volunteering his power to his friend on a silver platter. Giving up his power is his way of controlling his friend. The compliant controls the aggressive controller by pleasing her, hoping it will appease her and cause her to change her behavior. The aggressive controller needs to own that she has difficulty

listening to no and accepting the limits of others. She needs to take responsibility for her need to control her friend.

5. *What is needed?* The unhappier one in the friendship, the compliant, needs to plug into a supportive group of people to help him with this boundary conflict.

6. *How do they begin?* In preparation for confronting his friend, the compliant needs to practice setting limits in his support group. The aggressive controller could really benefit from honest feedback from loving friends on how she runs over people and how she can learn to respect the limits of others.

7. *How do they set boundaries?* The compliant applies biblical principles to his friendship (see Matthew 18). He confronts his friend on her control and intimidation. He tells her that the next time she tries to control him, he will leave.

He does not attempt to control her. Confrontation isn't an ultimatum meant to rob her of her choices. He sets limits to let her know that her control hurts him and wounds their friendship. Such limits protect the compliant from further hurt. The aggressive controller can become as angry or intimidating as she wants, but the compliant won't be around to get hurt. He will be out of the room, the house, or the friendship—until it's safe to come back.

The aggressive controller experiences the consequences of her actions. Not having her friend around may force her to miss

the attachment, and she can begin to take responsibility for the control that ran her friend off.

8. *Now what?* At this point, if both friends are open, the two can renegotiate the relationship. They can set new ground rules, such as, “I’ll stop nagging if you’ll stop being critical,” and can build a new friendship.

Conflict #3: Compliant/Manipulative Controller

“Cathy, I’m in a real jam, and you’re the only one I can depend on to help me out. I can’t get a baby-sitter for the kids, and I have this church meeting. . . .”

Cathy listened to the plight of her friend, Sharon. It was the usual story. Sharon neglected to plan for events, to call ahead for sitters. She often called Cathy to help out in these self-induced emergencies.

Cathy hated being stuck in this position. Sharon didn’t do it on purpose, and she needed her for a good cause, but Cathy still felt used and exploited. What was she to do?

Many friendships get stuck in this interaction between complaints and manipulative controllers. Why do we call Sharon controlling? She’s not consciously trying to manipulate her friend; however, no matter what her good intentions are, when she’s in a jam, Sharon uses her friends. She takes them for granted, thinking that they shouldn’t mind doing a friend

a favor. Her friends go along, saying, “Well, that’s just Sharon.” They stifle their resentment.

Let’s run this conflict through our boundary checklist:

1. *What are the symptoms?* The compliant (Cathy) feels resentment at the manipulative controller’s (Sharon’s) last-minute requests. Cathy feels as though her friendship is being taken for granted. She begins to avoid her friend.

2. *What are the roots?* Sharon’s parents rescued her from every jam, from finishing term papers at 3:00 A.M. to lending her money when she was well into her thirties. She lived in a very forgiving universe, where nice people would always help her out. She never had to face her own irresponsibility and lack of discipline and planning.

As a child, Cathy didn’t like her mother’s hurt look when she said no. She grew up afraid of hurting others by setting boundaries. Cathy would do anything to avoid conflict with friends—especially with Sharon.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* Sharon doesn’t plan ahead and take responsibility for her schedule. When responsibilities “get away from her,” she calls out to the nearest compliant for help. And Cathy comes running.

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* Cathy, the motivated party in this conflict, sees how her never-ending yes contributes to Sharon’s illusion that she doesn’t ever have to plan ahead. Cathy needs to stop feeling like

a victim and take responsibility for saying no. *What does she need?* Cathy needs to connect with others who will support her as she looks at the boundary issues between her and her friend.

5.*How does she begin?* Cathy practices saying no with supportive friends. In a supportive atmosphere she learns to disagree, to state her opinion, and to confront. They all pray for strength and guidance in this relationship.

6.*How does she set boundaries?* At their next lunch, Cathy tells Sharon about her feelings of being used and taken advantage of. She explains how she'd like a more mutual relationship. Then she lets her friend know that she won't be taking any more "emergency" baby-sitting jobs.

Sharon, unaware of how she was hurting her friend, is genuinely sorry about the problem. She begins to take more responsibility for her schedule. After a few futile attempts to get Cathy to baby-sit at the last minute and having to miss a few important meetings, she starts planning for events a week or two ahead of time. *What happens next?* The friendship grows and deepens. Over time, Cathy and Sharon laugh over the conflict that actually brought them closer.

Conflict #4: Compliant/Nonresponsive

Remember the Marsha-Tammy friendship at the beginning of this chapter? One friend doing all the work and the other coasting illustrates

the compliant/nonresponsive conflict. One party feels frustrated and resentful; the other wonders what the problem is. Marsha sensed that the friendship wasn't as important to Tammy as it was to her.

Let's analyze the situation:

1. *What are the symptoms?* Marsha feels depressed, resentful, and unimportant. Tammy, however, may feel guilty or over-whelmed by her friend's needs and demands.

2. *What are the roots?* Marsha always feared that if she didn't control her important attachments by doing all the work, she'd be abandoned. So she became a Martha to everyone else's Mary, a worker instead of a lover (Luke 10:38–42). Tammy has never had to work hard for friendships. Always popular and in demand, she's passively taken from important friendships. She's never lost anyone by not being responsive. In fact, they work harder to keep her around.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* There could be two boundary conflicts here. First, Marsha takes on too much responsibility for the friendship. She's not letting her friend bear her own load (Gal. 6:5). Second, Tammy doesn't take enough responsibility for the friendship. She knows that Marsha will come up with activities from which she can pick and choose. Why work when someone else will?

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* Marsha needs to take responsibility for making it too easy for Tammy to do nothing. She sees that her attempts to plan, call, and do all the work are disguised attempts to control love.

5. *What do they need?* Both women need support from other friends. They can't look objectively at this problem without a relationship or two of unconditional love around them.

6. *How do they begin?* Marsha practices setting limits with supportive friends. She realizes that she will still have friendships in which each friend carries her own weight if she and Tammy break off their friendship.

7. *How do they set boundaries?* Marsha tells Tammy about her feelings and informs her that she will need to take equal responsibility for their friendship in the future. In other words, after Marsha calls, she won't call again unless Tammy does. Marsha hopes that Tammy will miss her and begin calling.

If worst comes to worst and the friendship atrophies due to Tammy's unresponsiveness, Marsha has gained something. She's learned it wasn't a mutual connection in the first place. Now she can grieve, get over it, and move on to find real friends.

8. *What happens next?* The mini-crisis changes the character of the friendship permanently. It either exposes it for a non relationship—or it provides soil for the rebuilding of a better one.

Questions about Friendship Boundary Conflicts

Boundary conflicts in friendships are difficult to deal with because the only cord tying the relationship together is the attachment itself. There's no wedding ring. There's no job connection. There's just the friendship—and it often seems all too fragile and in danger of being severed.

People who are in the above conflicts often raise the following questions when they consider setting boundaries on their friendships.

Question #1: Aren't Friendships Easily Broken?

Most friendships have no external commitment, such as marriage, work, or church, to keep the friends together. The phone could just stop ringing and the relationship die with no real ripples in the lives of the participants. So aren't friendships at greater risk of breaking up when boundary conflicts arise?

This type of thinking has two problems. First, it assumes that external institutions such as marriage, work, and church are the glue that holds relationships together. It assumes that our commitments are what hold us together, not our attachments. Biblically and practically, nothing could be further from the truth.

We hear this thinking in many Christian circles: “If you don’t like someone, act like you do.” Or, “make yourself love them.” Or, “commit to loving someone.” Or, “choose to love someone, and the feelings will come.”

Choice and commitment *are* elements of a good friendship. We do need more than fair-weather friends. However, Scripture teaches us that we can’t depend on commitment or sheer

willpower, for they will always let us down. Paul cried out that he did what he didn’t want to do, and he didn’t do what he wanted to do (Rom. 7:19). He was stuck. We all experience the same conflict. Even when we commit to a loving friendship, bad things happen. We let them down. Feelings go sour. Simply white-knuckling it won’t reestablish the relationship.

We can solve our dilemma the same way Paul solved his: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). The answer is being “in Christ Jesus”— in other words, in relationship with Christ, both vertically and horizontally. As we stay connected to God, to our friends, and to our support groups, we are filled up with the grace to hang in there and fight out the boundary conflicts that arise. Without this external source of connection, we’re doomed to an empty willpower that ultimately fails or makes us think we’re omnipotent.

Again, the Bible teaches that all commitment is based on a loving relationship. Being loved leads to commitment and willful decision-making—not the reverse.

How does this apply to friendships? Look at it this way. How would you feel if your best buddy approached you and said: “I just wanted to tell you that the only reason we’re friends is because I’m committed to our friendship. There’s nothing that draws me to you. I don’t particularly enjoy your company. But I will keep choosing to be your friend.” You probably wouldn’t feel very safe or cherished in this relationship. You’d suspect you were being befriended out of obligation, not out of love. Don’t let anyone fool you. All friendships need to be based on attachment, or they have a shaky foundation.

The second problem with thinking that friendships are weaker than institutionalized relationships such as marriage, church, and work is in assuming that those three aren’t attachment-based. It simply isn’t true. If it were, wedding vows would ensure a zero percent divorce rate. Professions of faith would ensure faithful church attendance. A hiring would ensure one hundred percent attendance at work. These three important institutions, so crucial to our lives, are, to a large degree, attachment-based.

It’s scary to realize that the only thing holding our friends to us isn’t our performance, or our lovability, or their guilt, or their obligation. The

only thing that will keep them calling, spending time with us, and putting up with us is love. And that's the one thing we can't control.

At any moment, any person can walk away from a friendship. However, as we enter more and more into an attachment-based life, we learn to trust love. We learn that the bonds of a true friendship are not easily broken. And we learn that, in a good relationship, we can set limits that will strengthen, not injure, the connection.

Question #2: How Can I Set Boundaries in Romantic Friendships?

Single Christians have tremendous struggles with learning to be truth-tellers and limit-setters in romantic, dating friendships. Most of the conflicts revolve around the fear of losing the relationship. A client may say: "There's someone in my life whom I like a lot—but I'm afraid if I say no to him, I'll never see him again."

A couple of unique principles operate in the romantic sphere:

1. *Romantic relationships are, by nature, risky.* Many singles who have not developed good attachments with other people and who have not had their boundaries respected try to learn the rules of biblical friendships by dating. They hope that the safety of these relationships will help them learn to love, be loved, and set limits.

Quite often, these individuals come out of a few months of dating more injured than when they went in. They may feel let down, put down,

or used. This is not a dating problem. It's a problem in understanding the purpose of dating.

The purpose of dating is to practice and experiment. The end goal of dating is generally to decide, sooner or later, whether or not to marry. Dating is a means to find out what kind of person we complement and with whom we are spiritually and emotionally compatible. It's a training ground for marriage.

This fact causes a built-in conflict. When we date, we have the freedom to say, at any time, "This isn't working out," and to end the relationship. The other person has the same freedom.

What does this mean for the person whose boundaries have been injured? Often, she brings immature, undeveloped aspects of her character to an adult romantic situation. In an arena of low commitment and high risk, she seeks the safety, bonding, and consistency that her wounds need. She entrusts herself too quickly to someone whom she is dating because her needs are so intense. And she will be devastated when things "don't work out." This is a little like sending a three-year-old to the front lines of battle. Dating is a way for adults to find out about each other's suitability for marriage; it's not a place for young, injured souls to find healing. This healing can best be found in nonromantic arenas, such as support groups, church groups, therapy, and

same-sex friendships. We need to keep separate the purposes of romantic and nonromantic friendships.

It's best to learn the skill of setting boundaries in these non-romantic arenas, where the attachments and commitments are greater. Once we've learned to recognize, set, and keep our biblical boundaries, we can use them on the adult playground called dating.

2. Setting limits in romance is necessary. Individuals with mature boundaries sometimes suspend them in the initial stages of a dating relationship in order to please the other person. However, truth-telling in romance helps define the relationship. It helps each person to know where he starts and the other person stops.

Ignorance of one another's boundaries is one of the most blatant red flags of the poor health of a dating relationship. We'll ask a couple in premarital counseling, "Where do you disagree? Where do you lock horns?" When the answer is, "It's just amazing, we're so compatible, we have very few differences," we'll give the couple homework: Find out what you've been lying about to each other. If the relationship has any hope, that assignment will generally help.

Question #3: What If My Closest Friends Are My Family?

Boundary-developing individuals sometimes say, "But my mother (or father, or sister, or brother) is my best friend." They often feel fortunate that, in these times of family stress, their best friends are the family in

which they were raised. They don't think they need an intimate circle of friends besides their own parents and siblings.

They misunderstand the biblical function of the family. God intended the family to be an incubator in which we grow the maturity, tools, and abilities we need. Once the incubator has done its job, then, it's supposed to encourage the young adult to leave the nest and connect to the outside world (Gen. 2:24), to establish a spiritual and emotional family system on one's own. The adult is free to do whatever God has designed for him or her.

Over time, we are to accomplish God's purposes of spreading his love to the world, to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:19–20). Staying emotionally locked in to the family of origin frustrates this purpose. It's hard to see how we'll change the world when we have to live on the same street. No one can become a truly biblical adult without setting some limits, leaving home, and cleaving somewhere else. Otherwise, we never know if we have forged our own values, beliefs, and convictions—our very identity—or if we are mimicking the ideas of our family.

Can family be friends? Absolutely. But if you have never questioned, set boundaries, or experienced conflict with your family members, you may not have an adult-to-adult connection with your family. If you have no other “best friends” than your family, you need to take a close look at

those relationships. You may be afraid of separating and individuating, of becoming an autonomous adult.

Question #4: How Can I Set Limits with Needy Friends?

I was talking to a woman one day in session who felt extremely isolated and out of control. Setting limits with her friends seemed impossible for her; they were in perpetual crisis.

I asked her to describe the quality of her relationships. “Oh, I’ve got lots of friends. I volunteer at the church two nights a week. I teach a Bible study once a week. I’m on a couple of church committees, and I sing in the choir.”

“I’m getting exhausted just listening to you describe your week,” I said. “But what about the quality of these relationships?” “They’re great. People are being helped. They’re growing in their faith, and troubled marriages are getting healed.”

“You know,” I said, “I’m asking you about friendships, and you’re answering about ministries. They’re not the same thing.” She had never considered the difference. Her concept of friendship was to find people with needs and throw herself into a relationship with them. She didn’t know how to ask for things for herself.

And that was the source of her boundary conflicts. Without these “ministry relationships,” this woman would have had nothing. So she

couldn't say no. Saying no would have plummeted her into isolation, which would have been intolerable.

But it had happened anyway: she had come for help because of burnout. When the Bible tells us to comfort with the comfort with which we are comforted (2 Cor. 1:4), it's telling us something. We need to be comforted before we can comfort. That may mean setting boundaries on our ministries so that we can be nurtured by our friends. We must distinguish between the two.

A prayerful look at your friendships will determine whether you need to begin building boundaries with some of your friends. By setting boundaries, you may save some important ones from declining. And when romantic, dating relationships lead to marriage, you will still need to remember how to build and maintain boundaries even in this most intimate of human relationships.

Chapter Five

Boundaries and Your Spouse

If there were ever a relationship where boundaries could get confused, it is marriage, where by design husband and wife “become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31). Boundaries foster separateness. Marriage has as one of its goals the giving up of separateness and becoming, instead of two, one. What a potential state of confusion, especially for someone who does not have clear boundaries to begin with!

More marriages fail because of poor boundaries than for any other reason. This chapter will apply the laws of boundaries, as well as its myths, to the marital relationship.

Is This Yours, Mine, or Ours?

A marriage mirrors the relationship that Christ has with his bride, the church. Christ has some things that only he can do, the church has some things that only it can do, and they have some things they do together. Only Christ could die. Only the church can represent him on earth in his absence and obey his commands. And together, they work on many things, such as saving the lost. Similarly, in marriage, some duties one spouse does, some the other does, and some they do together. When the two become one on their wedding day, spouses do not lose their individual identities. Each participates in the relationship, and each has his or her own life.

No one would have a problem deciding who wears the dress and who wears the tie. It's a little trickier to decide who balances the checkbook and who mows the lawn. But these duties can be worked out according to the spouses' individual abilities and interests. Where boundaries can get confusing is in the elements of personhood—the elements of the soul that each person possesses and can choose to share with someone else.

The problem arises when one trespasses on the other's personhood, when one crosses a line and tries to control the feelings, attitudes,

behaviors, choices, and values of the other. These things only each individual can control. To try to control these things is to violate someone's boundaries, and ultimately, it will fail. Our relationship with Christ—and any other successful relationship—is based on freedom. Let's look at some common examples:

Feelings

One of the most important elements that promotes intimacy between two people is the ability of each to take responsibility for his or her own feelings.

I was counseling a couple who were having marital problems because of the husband's drinking. I asked the wife to tell her husband how she felt when he drank.

"I feel like he doesn't think about what he's doing. I feel like he . . ."

"No, you are evaluating his drinking. How do you feel about it?" "I feel like he doesn't care. . . ."

"No," I said, "That is what you *think* about him. How do you *feel* when he drinks?"

She started to cry. "I feel very alone and afraid." She had finally said what she felt.

At that point her husband reached out and put his hand on her arm. “I never knew you were afraid,” he said. “I would never want to make you afraid.”

This conversation was a real turning point in their relationship. For years the wife had been nagging her husband about the way he was and about the way he should be. He responded by blaming her and justifying his actions. In spite of hours and hours of talking, they had continued to talk past each other.

Neither was taking responsibility for his or her own feelings and communicating them.

We do not communicate our feelings by saying, “I feel that you. . .” We communicate our feelings by saying, “I feel sad, or hurt, or lonely, or scared, or. . .” Such vulnerability is the beginning of intimacy and caring.

Feelings are also a warning signal telling us that we need to do something. For example, if you are angry at someone for something she did, it is your responsibility to go to her and tell her you are angry and why. If you think that your anger is her problem and that she needs to fix it, you may wait years. And your anger may turn to bitterness. If you are angry, even if someone else has sinned against you, it is your responsibility to do something about it.

This was a lesson Susan needed to learn. When her husband, Jim, did not come home from work early enough for them to have time together, Susan became angry. Instead of confronting her husband, she would become very quiet for the rest of the evening. Jim became annoyed with having to pull out of her what was wrong. Eventually, hating her pouting, he left her alone.

Not dealing with hurt or anger can kill a relationship. Susan needed to talk with Jim about how she was feeling, instead of waiting for him to draw her out. Even though she felt he had been the one who had hurt her, she needed to take responsibility for her own hurt and anger.

Jim and Susan did not solve their problem by her simply expressing her anger to him. She needed to go one more step. She needed to clarify her desires in the conflict.

Desires

Desires are another element of personhood that each spouse needs to take responsibility for. Susan was angry because she wanted Jim to be home. She blamed him for being late. When they came in for counseling, our conversation went like this: “Susan, tell me why you get angry at Jim,” I said. “Because he’s late,” she replied. “That can’t be the reason,” I said. “People don’t make other people angry. Your anger has to come from something inside of you.” “What do you mean? He’s the one who comes home late.” “Well, what if you had plans to go out with

your friends that night? Would you still be angry at him for being late?” “Well, no. That’s different.” “What’s different? You said you were angry because he was late, and he would still be late, yet you wouldn’t be angry.” “Well, in that situation, he wouldn’t be doing anything to hurt me.”

“Not exactly,” I pointed out. “The difference is that you wouldn’t be wanting something that he didn’t want to give. Your disappointed desire is what hurts you, not his being late. The problem lies in who is responsible for the want. It is your want, not his. You are responsible for getting it fulfilled. That is a rule of life. We do not get everything we want, and we all must grieve over our disappointments instead of punish others for them.” “What about common respect? Staying at the office is selfish,” she said.

“Well, he wants to work some nights, and you want him home. Both of you want something for yourselves. We could say that you are as selfish as he is. The truth is that neither one of you is selfish. You just have conflicting wants. This is what marriage is about—getting conflicting wants worked out.”

There was no “bad guy” in this situation. Both Jim and Susan had needs. Jim needed to work late, and Susan needed him home. Problems arise when we make someone else responsible for our needs and wants, and when we blame them for our disappointments.

Limits on What I Can Give

We are finite creatures and must give as we “decide in [our] heart to give” (2 Cor. 9:7), being aware of when we are giving past the love point to the resentment point. Problems arise when we blame someone else for our own lack of limits. Often spouses will do more than they really want to and then resent the other for not stopping them from over giving.

Bob had this problem. His wife, Nancy, wanted the perfect home, including handmade patios, landscaping, and remodeling. She was always coming up with something for him to do around the house. He was beginning to resent her projects. When he came to see me, I asked him why he was angry. “Well, because she wants so much. I can’t find any time for myself,” he said. “What do you mean ‘can’t’? Don’t you mean ‘won’t’?” “No, I *can’t*. She would be angry if I didn’t do the work.” “Well, that’s her problem; it’s her anger.” “Yes, but I have to listen to it.” “No, you don’t,” I said. “You are choosing to do all of these things for her, and you are choosing to take the tongue lashings that happen if you don’t. Any time you spend doing things for her is a gift from you; if you do not want to give it, you don’t have to. Stop blaming her for all of this.”

Bob didn’t like that. He wanted her to stop wanting instead of his learning to say no. “How much time do you want to give her each week

for home improvement?” I asked. He thought for a minute. “About four hours. I could work on things for her and still have a little time left for a hobby.”

“Then tell her that you have been thinking about your time and that with all the other things you are doing for the family, you would like to give her four hours a week to work around the house. She is free to use that time any way she chooses.” “But what if she says that four hours is not enough?” “Explain to her that you understand that this may not be enough time to complete all the jobs she wants done, but those are her wants, not yours. Therefore, she is responsible for her own wants, and she is free to be creative in how she gets them done. She could earn some extra money and hire someone. She could learn to do them herself. She could ask a friend to help. Or, she could cut down on her wants. It is important that she learns that you are not going to take responsibility for her wants.

You’re going to give as you choose, and she is responsible for the rest.” Bob saw the logic in my suggestion and decided to talk with Nancy. It was not pretty at first. No one had ever said no to Nancy before, and she did not take well to it. But, over time, Bob took responsibility for his limits instead of wishing that Nancy would not want so much, and his limits took effect. She learned something that she had never learned before: the world does not exist for her. Other people are not extensions of her wants and desires. Other people have wants and

needs of their own, and we must negotiate a fair and loving relationship and respect each other's limits. T

he key here is that the other person is not responsible for our limits; we are. Only we know what we can and want to give, and only we can be responsible for drawing that line. If we do not draw it, we can quickly become resentful.

Applying the Laws of Boundaries to Marriage

In Chapter 5 we talked about the ten laws of boundaries.

Let's apply a few of those laws to troubled marital situations.

Chapter Six

The Law of Sowing and Reaping

Many times one spouse may be out of control and may not suffer the consequences of this behavior. The husband yells at his wife, and she tries to be more loving. In effect, the evil (yelling) produces good things (more loving) for him. Or, a wife overspends, and her husband pays the consequences. He gets a second job to cover the mound of bills.

Natural consequences are needed to resolve these problems. A wife needs to tell her overly critical husband that if he continues to berate her, she will go into another room until he can discuss the problem

rationally. Or, she could say something like, “I will not talk about this issue with you anymore alone. I will only talk in the presence of a counselor.” Or, “If you start yelling at me again, I will go to Jane’s house to spend the night.” The husband with the spendthrift wife needs to cancel the credit cards or tell her *she* needs to get a second job to pay the bills. These spouses all need to let the out-of-control spouses suffer the consequences of their actions. A friend of mine decided to let his wife suffer the consequences of her chronic lateness. He had nagged and nagged his wife about her tardiness, to no avail. Finally, he realized he could not change her; he could only change his response to her. Tired of suffering the consequences of her behavior, he decided to give them back to her.

One night they had plans to go to a banquet, and he did not want to be late. In advance, he told her that he wanted to be on time and that if she were not ready by 6:00 P.M., he would leave without her. She was late, and he left. When he came home that night, she screamed, “How could you leave without me!” He let her know that her lateness was what caused her to miss the banquet and that he was sad to have to go alone, but he did not want to miss the dinner. After a few more incidents like this, she knew that her lateness would affect her and not him, and she changed. These moves are not manipulative, as the other spouse will accuse. They are examples of someone limiting how they will allow themselves to be treated and exhibiting self-control. The

natural consequences are falling on the shoulders of the responsible party.

The Law of Responsibility

We talked earlier about taking responsibility *for* ourselves and having responsibility *to* others. The above examples show that. People who set limits exhibit self-control and show responsibility for themselves. They act responsible to their partner by confronting him or her. Setting limits is an act of love in the marriage; by binding and limiting the evil, they protect the good.

Taking responsibility for someone's anger, pouting, and disappointments by giving in to that person's demands or controlling behavior destroys love in a marriage. Instead of taking responsibility for people we love, or rescuing them, we need to show responsibility to them by confronting evil when we see it.

The Law of Evaluation

When you confront your husband or wife and begin to set boundaries, your partner may be hurt. In evaluating the pain that your boundary setting causes your spouse, remember that love and limits go together. When you set boundaries, be lovingly responsible to the person in pain.

Spouses who are wise and loving will accept boundaries and act responsibly toward them. Spouses who are controlling and self-centered will react angrily.

Remember that a boundary always deals with yourself, not the other person. You are not demanding that your spouse do something—even respect your boundaries. You are setting boundaries to say what you will do or will not do. Only these kinds of boundaries are enforceable, for you *do* have control over yourself. Do not confuse boundaries with a new way to control a spouse. It is the opposite. It is giving up control and beginning to love. You are giving up trying to control your spouse and allowing him to take responsibility for his own behavior.

The Law of Exposure

In a marriage, as in no other relationship, the need for revealing your boundaries is important. Passive boundaries, such as withdrawal, triangulation, pouting, affairs, and passive-aggressive behavior, are extremely destructive to a relationship. Passive ways of showing people that they do not have control over you never lead to intimacy. They never educate the other on who you really are; they only estrange.

Boundaries need to be communicated first verbally and then with actions. They need to be clear and unapologetic. Remember the types of boundaries we listed earlier: skin, words, truth, physical space, time, emotional distance, other people, consequences.

All of these boundaries need to be respected and revealed at different times in marriage. *Skin.* Each spouse needs to respect the other's physical body boundaries. Physical boundary violations can range from hurtful displays of affection to physical abuse. The Bible says that the husband and wife have "authority" over each other's body (1 Cor. 7:4–6 NASB); this is mutual authority, given freely. One should always remember Jesus' principle: "Treat others as you would want to be treated."*Words.* Your words need to be clear and spoken in love. Confront your spouse directly. Say no. Don't use passive resistance. Don't pout or withdraw. Say things like, "I do not feel comfortable with that. I do not want to. I won't."

Truth. Paul says that "each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully" (Eph. 4:25). Honest communication is always best. This includes telling the other person when he is not aware that he is violating one of God's standards. You also need to own the truth about your feelings and hurts and communicate those feelings directly to your spouse with love.

Physical Space. When you need time away, tell your spouse. Sometimes you need space for nourishment; other times you need space for limit setting. In either instance, your spouse should not have to guess why you do not want him around for a while. Communicate clearly so your spouse does not feel as though he is being punished, but knows he

is experiencing the consequences of his out-of-control behavior (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:9–13).

Emotional Distance. If you are in a troubled marriage, where your partner has had an affair, for example, you may need emotional space. Waiting to trust again is wise. You need to see if your spouse is truly repentant, and your spouse needs to see that her behavior has a cost. Your spouse may interpret this as punishment, but the Bible teaches that we are to judge a person by her actions, not by words (James 2:14–26).

In addition, a hurt heart takes time to heal. You cannot rush back into a position of trust with too much unresolved hurt. That hurt needs to be exposed and communicated. If you are hurting, you need to own that hurt. *Time.* Each spouse needs time apart from the relationship. Not just for limit setting, as we pointed out above, but for self-nourishment. The Proverbs 31 wife has a life of her own; she is out doing many things. The same is true of her husband. They have their own time for doing what they like and for seeing their own friends. Many couples have trouble with this aspect of marriage. They feel abandoned when their spouse wants time apart. In reality, spouses need time apart, which makes them realize the need to be back together. Spouses in healthy relationships cherish each other's space and are champions of each other's causes.

Other People. Some spouses need the support of others to set boundaries. If they haven't ever stood up for themselves, they need help from friends and the church in learning how. If you are too weak to set and enforce boundaries, get help from supporters outside your marriage. Do not, however, seek support from someone of the opposite sex that could lead to an affair. Get help from other people within relationships that have built-in boundaries, such as counselors or support groups.

Consequences. Communicate consequences clearly and enforce them firmly as you have said you would. Spelling out consequences in advance and enforcing them gives your spouse a choice about whether or not he or she wants the consequences to happen. Because people have control over their own behavior, they have control over the consequences of that behavior.

But That Doesn't Sound Submissive

Whenever we talk about a wife setting boundaries, someone asks about the biblical idea of submission. What follows is not a full treatise on submission, but some general issues you should keep in mind.

First, both husbands and wives are supposed to practice submission, not just wives. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). Submission is always the free choice of one party to another. Wives choose to submit to their husbands, and husbands choose to submit to their wives.

Christ's relationship with the church is a picture of how a husband and wife should relate: "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in every-thing. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:24–27).

Whenever submission issues are raised, the first question that needs to be asked is, What is the nature of the marital relationship? Is the husband's relationship with his wife similar to Christ's relationship with the church? Does she have free choice, or is she a slave "under the law"? Many marital problems arise when a husband tries to keep his wife "under the law," and she feels all the emotions the Bible promises the law will bring: wrath, guilt, insecurity, and alienation (Rom. 4:15; James 2:10; Gal. 5:4).

Freedom is one issue that needs to be examined; grace is another. Is the husband's relationship with his wife full of grace and unconditional love? Is she in a position of "no condemnation" as the church is (Rom. 8:1), or does her husband fail to "wash her" of all guilt? Usually husbands who quote Ephesians 5 turn their wives into slaves and condemn them for not submitting. If she incurs wrath or condemnation for not submitting, she and her husband do not have a grace-filled Christian marriage; they have a marriage "under the law."

Often, in these situations, the husband is trying to get his wife to do something that either is hurtful or takes away her will. Both of these actions are sins against himself. “Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church” (Eph. 5:28–29). Given this, the idea of slavlike submission is impossible to hold. Christ never takes away our will or asks us to do something hurtful. He never pushes us past our limits. He never uses us as objects. Christ “gave himself up” for us. He takes care of us as he would his own body.

We have never seen a “submission problem” that did not have a controlling husband at its root. When the wife begins to set clear boundaries, the lack of Christlikeness in a controlling husband becomes evident because the wife is no longer enabling his immature behavior. She is confronting the truth and setting biblical limits on hurtful behavior. Often, when the wife sets boundaries, the husband begins to grow up.

A Question of Balance

“I can’t get him to spend any time with me. All he wants to do is go with his friends to sporting events. He never wants to see me,” Meredith complained. “What do you say to that?” I asked her husband.

“That’s not true at all,” Paul replied. “It feels like all we have is togetherness. She calls me at work two or three times a day. She is waiting at the door when I get home and wants to talk. She has our evenings and weekends all planned out. It drives me crazy. So, I try to get away and go to a game or to play golf. I feel smothered.” “How often do you try to get out?” “Any time I can. Probably about two nights a week and one afternoon on the weekend.” “What do you do at those times?” I asked Meredith. “Well, I wait for him to come home. I miss him very much.” “Don’t you have something you want to do for yourself?” “No. My family is my life. I live for them. I hate it when they are gone and we can’t have time together.”

“Well, it’s not like you never have time together,” I said. “But it is true that you don’t have all the time together. And when that happens, Paul seems to be relieved and you are distressed. Can you explain that imbalance?” “What do you mean, ‘imbalance’?” she asked.

“Every marriage is made up of two ingredients, togetherness and separateness. In good marriages, the partners carry equal loads of both of those. Let’s say there are 100 points of togetherness and 100 points of separateness. In a good relationship, one partner expresses 50 points of togetherness and 50 points of separateness, and the other does the same. They both do things on their own, and that creates some mutual longing for the other, and the togetherness creates some need for separateness. But in your relationship, you have divided the 200 points differently.

You are expressing all of the 100 together points, and he is expressing the 100 points of separateness.

“If you want him to move toward you,” I continued, “you need to move away from him and create some space for longing. I don’t think Paul ever gets a chance to miss you. You’re always pursuing him, and he is turning away to create space. If you would create some space, he would have some space to long for you in, and then he would pursue you.”“That’s exactly right,” Paul broke in. “Honey, it’s like when you were getting your graduate degree and were gone so much. Remember? I used to long to see you. I don’t get a chance to miss you now. You’re always around.”Meredith was reluctant to concede my point, but eager to explore with Paul ways to bring balance to their marital relationship.

Balance. It’s something that God has wired into every system. Every system tries to find balance in any way it can. And many dimensions need to be balanced in a marriage: power, strength, togetherness, sex, and so on. Problems come when, instead of trading places in these areas, one spouse is always powerful and the other powerless; one spouse is always strong and the other weak; one spouse always wants togetherness and the other wants separateness; one spouse always wants sex and the other doesn’t. In each case, the couple has struck a balance, but it is not a *mutual* balance.

Boundaries help create mutual balance, instead of split balance. They help couples keep each other accountable. If someone does not have boundaries and begins to do another's work for him, such as creating all the togetherness in the relationship, that person is on the road to codependency or worse. The other partner will live out the opposite side of the split. Boundaries keep partners accountable through consequences and force the balance to become mutual. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes says, "There is a time for every-thing, and a season for every activity under heaven" (3:1). There are balanced polarities in life and relationship. When you find yourself in an unequal relationship, you may lack boundaries. Setting boundaries may correct the imbalance. For example, when Paul sets boundaries on Meredith's demands, he forces her to become more independent.

Resolution

It is often easy to see problems, but difficult to make the hard choices and risks that result in change. Let's look at the steps toward personal change in a marital relationship.

1. *Inventory the symptom.* First, you need to recognize the problem and agree to take action to solve it. You will not resolve the problem by wishing. You need to own the problem, whether it be sex, discipline of the children, lack of togetherness, or unfair spending of money.

2. *Identify the specific boundary problem.* One step beyond identifying the symptom is putting your finger on the specific boundary issue. For instance, the symptom may be that one person does not want sex; the boundary problem may be that this person does not say no often enough in other areas of the relationship so that this is the one place that she has some power. Or, she may feel as if she does not have enough control in the sexual arena. She may feel powerless; she may feel that her choices are not honored.

3. *Find the origins of the conflict.* This is probably not the first relationship in which this boundary issue has arisen. You probably learned to relate this way in a significant relationship in the family in which you grew up. Certain fears that were developed in that relationship are still operative. You need to name these original issues; you may need to stop confusing your parent with your spouse. No other relationship repeats parental conflicts more often than the marriage relationship.

4. *Take in the good.* This step involves establishing a support system. Remember, “Boundaries are not built in a vacuum.” We need bonding and support before we build boundaries; the fear of abandonment keeps many people from setting boundaries in the first place.

For this reason, establish a support system that will encourage boundary setting in your marriage. This may be a co-dependency group, Al-Anon, a therapist, a marriage counselor, or a pastor. Do not set

boundaries alone. You have not set boundaries because you are afraid; the only way out is through support. “And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (Ecc. 4:12). Boundaries are like muscles. They need to be built up in a safe support system and allowed to grow. If you try to shoulder too much weight too quickly, your muscles may tear or be pulled. Get help.

5. Practice. Practice new boundaries in safe relationships, relationships in which people love you unconditionally. Tell a good friend no when you can't do lunch, or let her know when your opinion differs from hers, or give something to her without expecting anything in return. As you practice setting limits with safe people, you will begin to grow in your ability to set limits in your marriage.

6. Say no to the bad. Put limits on the bad in your marriage. Stand up to abuse; say no to unreasonable demands. Remember the parable of the talents. There was no growth without risk and a facing up to fear. Being successful is not as important as step-ping out and trying.

7. Forgive. To not forgive is to lack boundaries. Unforgiving people allow other people to control them. Setting people who have hurt you free from an old debt is to stop wanting something from them; it sets you free as well. Forgiving can lead to proactive behavior in the present, instead of passive wishes from the past.

8. *Become proactive.* Instead of allowing someone else to be in control, figure out what you want to do, set your course, and stick to it. Decide what your limits are, what you will allow your-self to be a party to, what you will no longer tolerate, and what consequences you will set. Define yourself proactively, and you will be ready to maintain your boundaries when the time comes.

9. *Learn to love in freedom and responsibility.* Remember the goal of boundaries: love coming out of freedom. This is the true self-denial of the New Testament. When you are in control of yourself, you can give and sacrifice for loved ones in a helpful way instead of giving in to destructive behavior and self-centeredness. This kind of freedom allows one to give in a way that leads to fruit. Remember, “no greater love has anyone than to lay down his life for his friends.” This is to live up to the law of Christ, to serve one another. But this must be done out of freedom, not boundary less compliance.

Setting and receiving firm boundaries with your spouse can lead to a much greater intimacy. But you not only need to address boundaries with your spouse; you need to address boundaries with your children. And it’s never too late to start.