

Healthy Boundaries

From the Creation, God has established a world where there are boundaries. In *Genesis*, He told Adam there were limits in the garden (*Gen. 2:16-17*). Throughout His Word we also see played out the principles of consequences for actions (*Gal. 6:7-8*) with responsibility for our own choices (*Deut. 30:19, Ez. 18:20*). As we apply these instructions to our lives, we are encouraged to build and maintain healthy personal boundaries, purposing to keep the “evil” out and let the “good” in. A boundary is a personal “property” line. It marks those things which we are responsible for and separates out those things for which we are not responsible. Boundaries place limits on the claims other people may make on us, our time, and our resources. They help us establish priorities, balance, and sanity in an overcommitted world. Establishing healthy boundaries can help us maintain healthy relationships throughout *all* aspects of our lives.

Types of Boundaries.

Healthy boundaries assist us in knowing when to say yes and when it is appropriate to say no. Imagine a fence with a gate. The gate is there to keep the bad out and let the good in. We control when we open and shut the gate. Unhealthy boundaries can become either too loose or too rigid. When boundaries are too loose, we do not place any limits on our resources and can soon become overwhelmed, trying to satisfy all the claims on ourselves. Visualize chalk lines or lines in the sand. These boundary lines are easily overrun and can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout if we do not maintain a disciplined approach to life and its demands. On the other hand, rigid boundaries such as refusing to give help and share our resources with others or refusing to allow good into and out of our lives are unhealthy. Think of a concrete wall. Rigid boundaries are sometimes a reverse reaction by someone having had loose boundaries for too long. Losing this perspective and balance by ebbing from saying yes to everything to now always saying no is unhealthy.

Boundaries in Action.

At times, we may focus so much on being loved and being loving and unselfish, we forget our own limits and limitations. We struggle with the idea of balance. Some of the questions we may ask are: Can I set limits for myself and still be a loving person? What are legitimate boundaries, balancing God’s grace and my own abilities? What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries? How do I kindly answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money beyond what I am able to give? Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?

These are legitimate questions that require prayerful answers. Godly boundaries, created in conjunction with biblical principles, give us definition and direction in life. A key scriptural passage is *Galatians 6:2-5*.

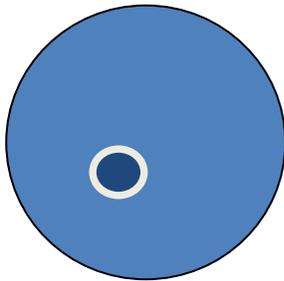
Gal. 6:2-5 “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. ³For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. ⁴But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. ⁵For every man shall bear his own burden.”

In this passage, we see the limits which God’s principles place upon our life. We are to help each other bear their “burdens” while being responsible for carrying our own “burden.” To properly understand this passage, it is important to know the Greek word for “burdens” in *verse 2* is referring to heavy weights someone cannot carry alone, like boulders. The Greek word for “burden” in *verse 5* however refers to a daily load or knapsack,

something each of us should be able to carry ourselves. Thus, we see the principle where we are responsible to help others when they are overwhelmed by circumstances of life yet also are responsible for ourselves and the daily obligations we face. This is a key principle in helping balance out our boundaries. We can overwhelm ourselves and actually hurt others by continually doing for them what they can be doing for themselves. Wisdom is understanding and applying this balance of boundaries to our lives.

Circle of Concern and Circle of Influence.

Another way to look at this concept is to think of what is commonly called our Circle of Concern. Picture life as a large circle, composed of all the things that concern us. This is our Circle of Concern. Within this circle, think of a much smaller circle which is our Circle of Influence. This is the area of our Circle of Concern we can actually influence. It can be visually depicted like this diagram.



Most people will spend 90% of their time in the Circle of Concern areas where they have no influence and only 10% of their time in the Circle of Influence. We should be encouraged to spend 90% of our time in the Circle of Influence, and prayerfully commit the other areas to God. This example can help us reflect on how much time and energy we are spending on those areas which are our responsibility and how much we are spending on areas where we truly have no influence.

Boundary Examples in Scripture.

Christ demonstrated healthy boundaries in His life. In *Mark 6:30-32*, He encouraged His apostles to “*come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while*” even though there were many “*coming and going*” nearby whom they could have taught and served. Christ often demonstrated this principle personally when He would separate Himself for times of prayer with the Father (*Mark 6:46*). Knowing when it is time for rest is crucial in our lives and in our ministries. Christ Himself said “*For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good...*” in *Mark 14:7*. There will always be opportunities to do good. We are encouraged to not neglect the service of the poor but also maintain balance in the midst of this service.

The account of the Good Samaritan in *Luke 10* illustrates how healthy boundaries can be employed in our lives. The priest and Levite who passed by the injured man were exercising rigid boundaries because of their position and/or a misapplication of God’s Word. Perhaps urgent business and/or the fear of uncleanness by touching someone wounded and possibly dead kept them from offering love and assistance to one in need. The Samaritan was also going about his day, but he opened the fence gate of his boundaries to offer assistance. When he brought the man to the inn, however, he didn’t stay there. The Good Samaritan exercised his own boundaries and after having done what he could, he went on his way with the promise that any additional expenses would be covered at a later time. He established a boundary. Establishing proper balance in boundaries is not easy, but it is something we should be aware of and prayerfully consider.

Resistance to Boundaries.

Beginning to identify where new boundaries are needed or enforcing existing ones will probably meet with some kind of resistance. Resistance may come from our own internal fears or insecurities. The first time we say “no” to a task or duty, we may experience guilt if we have been accustomed to usually being compliant and always saying “yes.” Guilt can be a major obstacle in establishing boundaries. When we establish new boundaries, it is essential to remember they may not be accepted well or appreciated by others. We should be prepared for this resistance as well. We cannot control others and how they act towards us, but we can control how we respond to them. In *Ephesians 4:15*, we are reminded to speak the truth in love. There may be times when gentle firmness will be required to maintain the boundaries. It is wise to be assertive without being aggressive or offensive.

Yielding to demands in order to avoid conflict allows our boundaries to erode and affects ourselves and our relationships.

Personal Application.

So how do we apply the concept of having boundaries? We need to prayerfully examine our lives and establish what is important to ourselves, our families, and our relationship with God. We need to first set biblical priorities for our own activities and activities involving others and then adjust our personal behaviors and our behavior toward others to support the priorities we have established. For instance, if it is important for us to have uninterrupted dinner together as a family, we need to take the phone off the hook or shut off the cell phone. We may need to guard a certain number of free nights a week as ‘family or personal time’ where other activities might need to be respectfully declined. If our calendars are already full with high priority activities and a new task or responsibility comes our way, we may need to politely decline.

Boundaries allow us to take control of the areas of our lives we can control. Having boundaries means being firm in our convictions and priorities. It also means respecting those same items in the lives of others. It does not limit the amount of love and prayer we can share with others, but it does limit and prioritize how we will spend our time and other such limited resources. We need to prayerfully find the right balance of boundaries where we can serve in a healthy manner, thus glorifying God in all of our relationships.

Several thoughts referenced in this article are adapted from Boundaries, Cloud & Townsend, 1992.

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