



The 10 Laws of **BOUNDARIES**

Taken from the 2017
Updated & Expanded
Edition

DR. HENRY CLOUD & DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

I've been recommending *Boundaries* to friends, team members and radio listeners for more than twenty years. In fact, hardly a day goes by when I don't use something that I learned from this book. The principles are timeless, and the updates in this version make *Boundaries* even more relevant to readers and their relationships.

DAVE RAMSEY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND
NATIONALLY SYNDICATED RADIO SHOW HOST

Now updated and expanded, this classic book is more timely and relevant than ever for today's "always on, always there" culture. If technology and social media are intruding on your life and relationships, learn from the boundaries experts how to protect yourself and the people you love. This life-changing book is still the go-to guide for healthy relationships, personal growth, and true freedom in Christ.

ANDY STANLEY, PASTOR, AUTHOR, COMMUNICATOR,
AND FOUNDER OF NORTH POINT MINISTRIES

Of every book that I've read, *Boundaries* is the one I recommend most often. All of us can overcommit, become doormats, or find ourselves in codependent and dysfunctional relationships. Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend's one-of-a-kind book helps guide the reader through a change in mindset that eventually leads to a change in actions. If you know you have some unhealthy patterns in friendships, at work, in your schedule, with technology or your family, this book will help you establish the boundaries you need to create the life you are supposed to live.

CRAIG GROESCHEL, PASTOR OF LIFE.CHURCH
AND *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Cloud and Townsend's bestseller is even more relevant today than it was twenty years ago. Fresh stories, current examples, and an entire new chapter on "Boundaries and the Digital Age" mean this book continues to be one of the best resources available when it comes to maintaining healthy relationships.

BILL HYBELS

Boundaries by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend is truly an “in case of (relational) fire—remove hammer, break glass” kind of book. If you need the pain to stop and the healing to start, read this life-changing book and follow its instruction to freedom.

DR. JAMES MACDONALD, SENIOR PASTOR OF
HARVEST BIBLE CHAPEL AND AUTHOR OF
VERTICAL CHURCH AND *ACT LIKE MEN*.
JAMESMACDONALD.ORG

Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend continue to break the boundaries of incredible revelation in their new and revised edition of *Boundaries*. As the senior pastor of a large church, this message has not only changed my life, but the lives of my staff and congregation. If you want to learn how to have healthier relationships, you need to read this book!

ROBERT MORRIS, FOUNDING SENIOR PASTOR,
GATEWAY CHURCH, DALLAS/FORT WORTH, TEXAS;
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE BLESSED LIFE*,
THE GOD I NEVER KNEW, *TRULY FREE*, AND *FREQUENCY*



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Boundaries

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Since the case studies in this book are composites from Dr. Henry Cloud’s and Dr. John Townsend’s practices, we have not attempted to identify which author is counseling which client in all cases. All names and circumstances, however, have been fictionalized to protect privacy.

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The 10 Laws of Boundaries

Imagine for a moment that you live on another planet operating under different principles. Suppose your planet has no gravity and no need for a medium of exchange such as money. You get your energy and fuel from osmosis instead of eating and drinking. Suddenly, without warning, you find yourself transported to Earth.

When you awake from your trip, you step out of your hovering spacecraft and fall abruptly to the ground. “Ouch!” you say, not knowing exactly why you fell. After regaining your composure, you decide to travel around a bit but are unable to fly because of this new phenomenon called gravity. So you start walking.

After a while, you notice that, strangely, you feel hungry and thirsty. You wonder why. Where you come from, the galactic system rejuvenates your body automatically. Luckily, you run across an earthling who diagnoses your problem and tells you that you need food. Better yet, he recommends a place where you can eat, called Jack’s Diner.

You follow his directions, go into the restaurant, and manage to order some of this Earth food that contains all the nutrients you need. You immediately feel better. But then the man who gave you the food wants “fifteen dollars” for what he gave you. You have no idea what he’s talking about. After quite an argument, some men in uniforms come and take you away and put you in a small room with bars. *What in the world is going on?* you wonder.

You didn't mean anyone harm, yet you are in "jail," whatever that is. You can no longer move about as you want, and you resent it. You only tried to be about your own business, and now you have a sore leg, fatigue from your long walk, and a stomachache from eating too much. Nice place, this Earth.

Does this sound farfetched? People raised in dysfunctional families, or families where God's ways of boundaries are not practiced, have experiences similar to that of the alien. They find themselves transported into adult life where spiritual principles that have never been explained to them govern their relationships and well-being. They hurt, are hungry, and may end up in jail, but they never know the principles that could have helped them operate in accord with reality instead of against it. So, they are prisoners of their own ignorance.

God's world is set up with laws and principles. Spiritual realities are as real as gravity, and if you do not know them, you will discover their effects. Just because we have not been taught these principles of life and relationships does not mean they will not rule. We need to know the principles God has woven into life and operate according to them. Below are ten laws of boundaries that you can learn to begin to experience life differently.

Law 1: The Law of Sowing and Reaping

The law of cause and effect is a basic law of life. The Bible calls it the Law of Sowing and Reaping. "You reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (Gal. 6:7–8 NRSV).

When God tells us that we will reap what we sow, he is not punishing us; he's telling us how things really are. If you smoke cigarettes, you most likely will develop a smoker's hack, and you may even get lung cancer. If you overspend, you most likely will get calls from creditors, and you may even go hungry because you have no money for

food. On the other hand, if you eat right and exercise regularly, you may suffer fewer health problems. If you budget wisely, you will have money for the bills and for the grocery store.

Sometimes, however, people don't reap what they sow, because someone else steps in and reaps the consequences for them. If every time you overspent, your mother sent you money to cover check overdrafts or high credit card balances, you wouldn't reap the consequences of your spendthrift ways. Your mother would be protecting you from the natural consequences: the hounding of creditors or going hungry.

As the mother in the above example demonstrates, the Law of Sowing and Reaping can be interrupted. And it is often people who have no boundaries who do the interrupting. Just as we can interfere with the law of gravity by catching a glass tumbling off the table, people can interfere with the Law of Cause and Effect by stepping in and rescuing irresponsible people. Rescuing a person from the natural consequences of his behavior enables him to continue in irresponsible behavior. The Law of Sowing and Reaping has not been repealed. It is still operating. But the doer is not suffering the consequences; someone else is.

Today we call a person who continually rescues another person a codependent. In effect, codependent, boundaryless people "cosign the note" of life for the irresponsible people in their lives. Then they end up paying the bills—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—and the spendthrifts continue out of control with no consequences. They continue to be loved, pampered, and treated nicely.

Establishing boundaries helps codependent people stop interrupting the Law of Sowing and Reaping in their loved one's life. Boundaries force the person who is doing the sowing also to do the reaping.

It doesn't help just to confront the irresponsible person. A client will often say, "But I do confront Jack. I have tried many times to let him know what I think about his behavior and that he needs to change." In reality, the client is only nagging Jack. Jack will not feel the need to change because his behavior is not causing him any pain. *Confronting an irresponsible person is not painful to him; only consequences are.*

If Jack is wise, confrontation might change his behavior. But people

caught in destructive patterns are usually not wise. They need to suffer consequences before they change their behavior. The Bible tells us it is worthless to confront foolish people: “Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you” (Prov. 9:8).

Codependent people bring insults and pain on themselves when they confront irresponsible people. In reality, they just need to stop interrupting the Law of Sowing and Reaping in someone’s life.

Law 2: The Law of Responsibility

Many times when people hear a talk on boundaries and taking responsibility for their own lives, they say, “That’s so self-centered. We should love one another and deny ourselves.” Or they actually become selfish and self-centered. Or they feel “guilty” when they do someone a favor. These are unbiblical views of responsibility.

The Law of Responsibility includes loving others. The commandment to love is the entire law for Christians (Gal. 5:13–14). Jesus calls it “my” commandment: “Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Anytime you are *not* loving others, you are not taking full responsibility for yourself; you have disowned your heart.

Problems arise when boundaries of responsibility are confused. We are to *love* one another, not *be* one another. I can’t feel your feelings for you. I can’t think for you. I can’t behave for you. I can’t work through the disappointment that limits bring for you. In short, I can’t grow for you; only you can. Likewise, you can’t grow for me. The biblical mandate for our own personal growth is “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil. 2:12–13). You are responsible for *yourself*. I am responsible for *myself*.

An additional theme in the Bible says that we are to treat others the way we would want to be treated. If we were down and out, helpless and without hope, we would certainly want help and provision. This is a very important side of being responsible “to.”

Another aspect of being responsible “to” is not only in the giving but in the setting of limits on another’s destructive and irresponsible behavior. It is not good to rescue someone from the consequences of

their sin, for you will only have to do it again. You have reinforced the pattern (Prov. 19:19). It is the same principle spoken of in child rearing; it is hurtful not to have limits with others. It leads them to destruction (Prov. 23:13).

A strong strand throughout the Bible stresses that you are to *give* to needs and put *limits* on sin. Boundaries help you do just that.

Law 3: The Law of Power

As the Twelve Steps movement has grown within the church, Christians in therapy and recovery voice a common confusion. Am I powerless over my behavior? If I am, how can I become responsible? What *do* I have the power to do?

The Twelve Steps and the Bible teach that people must admit that they are moral failures. Alcoholics admit that they are powerless over alcohol; they don't have the fruit of self-control. They are powerless over their addiction, much like Paul was: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . . I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me" (Rom. 7:15, 19, 23). This is powerlessness. John says that we are all in that state, and that anyone who denies it is lying (1 John 1:8).

Though you do not have the power in and of yourself to overcome these patterns, you do have the power to do some things that will bring fruits of victory later:

1. *You have the power to agree with the truth about your problems.* In the Bible this is called "confession." To confess means to "agree with." You have the ability to at least say "that is me." You may not be able to change it yet, but you can confess.

2. *You have the power to submit your inability to God.* You always have the power to ask for help and yield. You have the power to humble yourself and turn your life over to him. You may not be able to make yourself well, but you can call the Doctor! The humbling of yourself commanded in the Bible is always coupled with great promises. If you

do what you are able—confess, believe, and ask for help—God will do what you are unable to do—bring about change (1 John 1:9; James 4:7–10; Matt. 5:3, 6).

3. *You have the power to search and ask God and others to reveal more and more about what is within your boundaries.*

4. *You have the power to turn from the evil that you find within you.* This is called *repentance*. This does not mean that you'll be perfect; it means that you can see your sinful parts as aspects that you want to change.

5. *You have the power to humble yourself and ask God and others to help you with your developmental injuries and leftover childhood needs.* Many of your problematic parts come from being empty inside, and you need to seek God and others to have those needs met.

6. *You have the power to seek out those whom you have injured and make amends.* You need to do this in order to be responsible for yourself and your sin, and be responsible to those you have injured. Matthew 5:23–24 says, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

On the other side of the coin, your boundaries help define what you do not have power over: *everything outside of them!* Listen to the way the serenity prayer (probably the best boundary prayer ever written) says it:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot
change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

In other words, God, clarify my boundaries! You can work on submitting yourself to the process and working with God to change you. You cannot change anything else: not the weather, the past, the economy—and especially not other people. *You cannot change others.* More people suffer from trying to change others than from any other sickness. And it is impossible.

What you *can* do is *influence* others. But there is a trick. Since you cannot get *them* to change, you must change *yourself* so that their destructive patterns no longer work on you. Change your way of dealing with them; they may be motivated to change if their old ways no longer work.

Another dynamic that happens when you let go of others is that you begin to get healthy, and they may notice and envy your health. They may want some of what you have.

One more thing. You need the wisdom to know what is you and what is not you. Pray for the wisdom to know the difference between what you have the power to change and what you do not.

Law 4: The Law of Respect

One word comes up again and again when people describe their problems with boundaries: *they*. “But *they* won’t accept me if I say no.” “But *they* will get angry if I set limits.” “But *they* won’t speak to me for a week if I tell them how I really feel.”

We fear that others will not respect our boundaries. We focus on others and lose clarity about ourselves. Sometimes the problem is that we judge others’ boundaries. We say or think things such as this:

“How could he refuse to come by and pick me up? It’s right on his way! He could find some ‘time alone’ some other time.”

“That’s so selfish of her not to come to the gathering. After all, the rest of us are sacrificing our time.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’? I just need the money for a little while.”

“It seems that, after all I do for you, you could at least do me this one little favor.”

We judge the boundary decisions of others, thinking that we know best how they “ought” to give, and usually that means “they ought to give to me the way I want them to!”

But the Bible says whenever we judge, we will be judged (Matt. 7:1–2). When we judge others’ boundaries, ours will fall under the same judgment. If we condemn others’ boundaries, we expect them to

condemn ours. This sets up a fear cycle inside that makes us afraid to set the boundaries that we need to set. As a result, we comply, then we resent, and the “love” that we have “given” goes sour.

This is where the Law of Respect comes in. As Jesus said, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12). We need to respect the boundaries of others. We need to love the boundaries of others in order to command respect for our own. We need to treat their boundaries the way we want them to treat ours.

If we love and respect people who tell us no, they will love and respect our no. Freedom begets freedom. If we are walking in the Spirit, we give people the freedom to make their own choices. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). If we are going to judge at all, it needs to be by the “perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25).

Our real concern with others should not be “Are they doing what I would do or what I want them to do?” but “Are they really making a free choice?” When we accept others’ freedom, we don’t get angry, feel guilty, or withdraw our love when they set boundaries with us. When we accept others’ freedom, we feel better about our own.

Law 5: The Law of Motivation

Stan was confused. He read in the Bible and was taught in church that it was more blessed to give than to receive, but he found that this often was not true. He frequently felt unappreciated for “all he was doing.” He wished people would have more consideration for his time and energy. Yet, whenever someone wanted something from him, he would do it. He thought this was loving, and he wanted to be a loving person.

Finally, when the fatigue grew into depression, he came to see me (Henry).

When I asked what was wrong, Stan replied that he was “loving too much.”

“How can you ‘love too much?’” I asked. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Oh, it’s very simple,” replied Stan. “I do far more for people than I should. And that makes me very depressed.”

“I’m not quite sure what you are doing,” I said, “but it certainly isn’t love. The Bible says that true love leads to a blessed state and a state of cheer. Love brings happiness, not depression. If your loving is depressing you, it’s probably not love.”

“I don’t see how you can say that. I do so much for everyone. I give and give and give. How can you say that I’m not loving?”

“I can say that because of the fruit of your actions. You should be feeling happy, not depressed. Why don’t you tell me some of the things you do for people?”

As we spent more time together, Stan learned that a lot of his “doing” and sacrificing was not motivated by love but by fear. Stan had learned early in life that if he did not do what his mother wanted, she would withdraw love from him. As a result, Stan learned to give reluctantly. His motive for giving was not love, but fear of losing love.

Stan was also afraid of other people’s anger. Because his father frequently yelled at him when he was a boy, he learned to fear angry confrontations. This fear kept him from saying no to others. Self-centered people often get angry when someone tells them no.

Stan said yes out of fear that he would lose love and that other people would get angry at him. These false motives and others keep us from setting boundaries:

1. *Fear of loss of love, or abandonment.* People who say yes and then resent saying yes fear losing someone’s love. This is the dominant motive of martyrs. They give to get love, and when they don’t get it, they feel abandoned.

2. *Fear of others’ anger.* Because of old hurts and poor boundaries, some people can’t stand for anyone to be mad at them.

3. *Fear of loneliness.* Some people give in to others because they feel that that will “win” love and end their loneliness.

4. *Fear of losing the “good me” inside.* We are made to love. As a result, when we are not loving, we are in pain. Many people cannot say, “I love you *and* I do not want to do that.” Such a statement does not make sense to them. They think that to love means to always say yes.

5. *Guilt.* Many people’s giving is motivated by guilt. They are

trying to do enough good things to overcome the guilt inside and feel good about themselves. When they say no, they feel bad. So they keep trying to earn a sense of goodness.

6. *Payback*. Many people have received things with guilt messages attached. For example, their parents say things like, “I never had it as good as you.” “You should be ashamed at all you get.” They feel a burden to pay for all they have been given.

7. *Approval*. Many feel as if they are still children seeking parental approval. Therefore, when someone wants something from them, they need to give so that this symbolic parent will be “well pleased.”

8. *Overidentification with the other’s loss*. Many times people have not dealt with all their own disappointments and losses, so whenever they deprive someone else with a no, they “feel” the other person’s sadness to the nth degree. They can’t stand to hurt someone that badly, so they comply.

The point is this: we were called into freedom, and this freedom results in gratitude, an overflowing heart, and love for others. To give bountifully has great reward. It is truly more blessed to give than to receive. If your giving is not leading to cheer, then you need to examine the Law of Motivation.

The Law of Motivation says this: Freedom first, service second. If you serve to get free of your fear, you are doomed to failure. Let God work on the fears, resolve them, and create some healthy boundaries to guard the freedom you were called to.

Law 6: The Law of Evaluation

“But if I told him I wanted to do that, wouldn’t he be hurt?” Jason asked. When Jason told me (Henry) he wished to assume responsibility for tasks his business partner was performing poorly, I encouraged him to talk to his partner.

“Sure he might be hurt,” I said, in response to his question. “So, what’s your problem?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to hurt him,” Jason said, looking at me as though I should have known that.

“I’m sure you would not want to hurt him,” I said. “But what does that have to do with the decision you have to make?”

“Well, I couldn’t just make a decision without taking his feelings into account. That’s cruel.”

“I agree with you. That would be cruel. But when are you going to tell him?”

“You just said that to tell him would hurt him and that would be cruel,” Jason said, perplexed.

“No, I didn’t,” I replied. “I said to tell him *without considering his feelings* would be cruel. That is very different from not doing what you need to do.”

“I don’t see any difference. It would still hurt him.”

“But it would not *harm* him, and that’s the big difference. If anything, the hurt would help him.”

“Now I’m really confused. How can it possibly help to hurt him?”

“Well, have you ever gone to the dentist?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“Did the dentist hurt you when he drilled your tooth to remove the cavity?”

“Yes.”

“Did he harm you?”

“No, he made me feel better.”

“*Hurt* and *harm* are different,” I pointed out. “When you ate the sugar that gave you the cavity, did that hurt?”

“No, it tasted good,” he said, with a smile that told me he was catching on.

“Did it harm you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s my point. Things can hurt and not harm us. In fact, they can even be good for us. And things that feel good can be very harmful to us.”

You need to evaluate the effects of setting boundaries and be responsible to the other person, but that does not mean you should avoid setting boundaries because someone responds with hurt or anger. To have boundaries—in this instance, Jason’s saying no to his partner—is to live a purposeful life.

Jesus refers to it as the “narrow gate.” It is always easier to go through the “broad gate of destruction” and continue not to set boundaries where we need to. But the result is always the same: destruction. Only the honest, purposeful life leads to good fruit. Deciding to set boundaries is difficult because it requires decision making and confrontation, which, in turn, may cause pain to someone you love.

We need to evaluate the pain caused by our making choices and empathize with it. Take Sandy, for example. Sandy chose to go skiing with friends instead of going home for Christmas vacation. Her mother was sad and disappointed, but she was not harmed. Sandy’s decision caused sadness, but her mother’s sadness should not cause Sandy to change her mind. A loving response to her mother’s hurt would be, “Oh, Mom, I’m sad that we won’t be together too. I’m looking forward to next summer’s visit.”

If Sandy’s mother respected her freedom to make choices, she would say something like this: “I’m so disappointed that you’re not coming home for Christmas, but I hope you all have a great time.” She would be owning her disappointment and respecting Sandy’s choice to spend her time with friends.

We cause pain by making choices that others do not like, but we also cause pain by confronting people when they are wrong. But if we do not share our anger with another, bitterness and hatred can set in. We need to be honest with one another about how we are hurt. “Speak truthfully to your neighbor, for [you] are all members of one body” (Eph. 4.25).

As iron sharpens iron, we need confrontation and truth from others to grow. No one likes to hear negative things about him or herself. But in the long run, it may be good for us. The Bible says that if we are wise, we will learn from it. Admonition from a friend, while it can hurt, can also help.

We need to evaluate the pain our confrontation causes other people. We need to see how this hurt is helpful to others and sometimes the best thing we can do for them and the relationship. We need to evaluate the pain in a positive light.

Law 7: The Law of Proactivity

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Paul says that wrath and sinful passions are a direct reaction to the severity of the law (Rom. 4:15; 5:20; 7:5). In Ephesians and Colossians he says that wrath and disillusionment can be reactions to parental injustice (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21).

Many of us have known people who, after years of being passive and compliant, suddenly go ballistic, and we wonder what happened. We blame it on the counselor they are seeing or the company they have been keeping.

In reality, they had been complying for years, and their pent-up rage explodes. This reactive phase of boundary creation is helpful, especially for victims. They need to get out of the powerless, victimized place in which they may have been forced by physical and sexual abuse, or by emotional blackmail and manipulation. We should herald their emancipation.

But when is enough enough? Reaction phases are *necessary but not sufficient* for the establishment of boundaries. It is crucial for the two-year-old to throw the peas at Mommy, but to continue that until forty-three is too much. It is crucial for victims of abuse to feel the rage and hatred of being powerless, but to be screaming “victims’ rights” for the rest of their lives is being stuck in a “victim mentality.”

Emotionally, the reactive stance brings diminishing returns. You must react to find your own boundaries, but having found them, you must not “use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. . . . But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another” (Gal. 5:13, 15 NLT). Eventually, you must rejoin the human race you have reacted to, and establish connections as equals, loving your neighbor as yourself.

This is the beginning of the establishment of *proactive* instead of reactive boundaries. This is where you are able to use the freedom

you gained through reacting to love, enjoy, and serve one another. Proactive people show you what they love, what they want, what they purpose, and what they stand for. These people are very different from those who are known by what they hate, what they don't like, what they stand against, and what they will not do.

While reactive victims are primarily known by their “against” stances, proactive people do not demand rights; they *live them*. Power is not something you demand or deserve; it is something you express. The ultimate expression of power is love; it is the ability not to express power, but to restrain it. Proactive people are able to “love others as themselves.” They have mutual respect. They are able to “die to self” and not “return evil for evil.” They have gotten past the reactive stance of the law and are able to love and not react.

Listen to Jesus compare the reactive person who is still controlled by the law and others with the free person: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (Matt. 5:38–39).

Do not try to get to freedom without owning your reactive period and feelings. You do not need to act this out, but you do need to express the feelings. You need to practice and gain assertiveness. You need to get far enough away from abusive people to be able to fence your property against further invasion. And then you need to own the treasures you find in your soul.

But do not stay there. Spiritual adulthood has higher goals than “finding yourself.” A reactive stage is a stage, not an identity. It is necessary but not sufficient.

Law 8: The Law of Envy

The New Testament speaks strongly against the envious heart. Consider James: “You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight” (James 4:2).

What does envy have to do with boundaries? Envy is probably the basest emotion we have. A direct result of the fall, it was Satan's sin. The Bible says that he had a wish to be “like the Most High” (Isa.

14:14) He envied God. In turn, he tempted Adam and Eve with the same idea, telling them that they could be like God also. Satan and our parents, Adam and Eve, were not satisfied with who they were and could rightfully become. They wanted what they did not have, and it destroyed them.

Envy defines “good” as “what I do not possess,” and hates the good that it has. How many times have you heard someone subtly put down the accomplishments of others, somehow robbing them of the goodness they had attained? We all have envious parts to our personalities. But what is so destructive about this particular sin is that it guarantees that we will not get what we want and keeps us perpetually insatiable and dissatisfied.

This is not to say that it is wrong to want things we do not have. God has said that he will give us the desires of our heart. The problem with envy is that it focuses outside our boundaries, onto others. If we are focusing on what others have or have accomplished, we are neglecting our responsibilities and will ultimately have an empty heart. Look at the difference in Galatians 6:4: “Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else.”

Envy is a self-perpetuating cycle. Boundaryless people feel empty and unfulfilled. They look at another’s sense of fullness and feel envious. This time and energy needs to be spent on taking responsibility for their lack and doing something about it. Taking action is the only way out. “You have not because you ask not.” And the Bible supports “because you work not.” Possessions and accomplishments are not the only things we envy. We can envy a person’s character and personality instead of developing the gifts God has given us (Rom. 12:6).

Think of these situations:

A lonely man stays isolated and envious of the close relationships others have.

A single woman withdraws from social life, envying the marriages and families of her friends.

A middle-aged woman feels stuck in her career and wants to

pursue something she would enjoy, yet she always has a “yes, but . . .” reason why she can’t, resenting and envying those who have “gone for it.”

A man chooses the righteous life but envies and resents those who seem to be “having all the fun.”

These people are all negating their own actions and comparing themselves to others (Gal. 6:4), staying stuck and resentful. Notice the difference between those statements and these:

A lonely man owns his lack of relationships and asks himself and God, *I wonder why I always withdraw from people. I can at least go and talk to a counselor about this. Even if I am afraid of social situations, I could seek some help. No one should live this way. I’ll make the call.*

The single woman asks, *I wonder why I never get asked out and why I keep getting turned down for dates. What is wrong about what I am doing or how I’m communicating or where I’m going to meet people? How could I become a more interesting person? Maybe I could join a therapy group to find out why or could use a dating site to find people with interests similar to mine.*

The middle-aged woman asks herself, *Why am I reluctant to pursue my interests? Why do I feel selfish when I want to quit my job to do something I enjoy? What am I afraid of? If I were really honest, I would notice that the ones who are doing what they like have had to take some risks and sometimes work and go to school to change jobs. That may just be more than I am willing to do.*

The righteous man asks himself, *If I am really “choosing” to love and serve God, why do I feel like a slave? What is wrong with my spiritual life? What is it about me that envies someone living in the gutter?*

These people are questioning themselves instead of envying others. Your envy should always be a sign to you that you are lacking

something. At that moment, you should ask God to help you understand what you resent, why you do not have whatever you are envying, and whether you truly desire it. Ask him to show you what you need to do to get there or to give up the desire.

Law 9: The Law of Activity

Human beings are responders and initiators. Many times we have boundary problems because we lack initiative—the God-given ability to propel ourselves into life. We respond to invitations *and* push ourselves into life.

The best boundaries are formed when a child is pushing against the world naturally and the outside world sets its limits on the child. In this way, the aggressive child learns limits without losing his or her spirit. Our spiritual and emotional well-being depends on our having this spirit.

Consider the contrast in the parable of the servants who were responsible for investing their master's gold (Matt. 25:14–30). The ones who succeeded were active and assertive. *They initiated and pushed.* The one who lost out was passive and inactive.

The sad thing is that many people who are passive are not inherently evil or bad people. But evil is an active force, and passivity can become an ally of evil by not pushing against it. Passivity never pays off. God will match our effort, but he will never do our work for us. That would be an invasion of our boundaries. He wants us to be assertive and active, seeking and knocking on the door of life.

We know that God is not mean to people who are afraid; the Scripture is full of examples of his compassion. But he will not enable passivity. The “wicked and lazy” servant was passive. He did not try. God's grace covers failure, but it cannot make up for passivity. We need to do our part.

The sin God rebukes is not trying and failing, but failing to try. Trying, failing, and trying again is called learning. Failing to try will have no good result; evil will triumph. God expresses his opinion toward passivity in Hebrews 10:38–39: “‘But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.’”

But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.” Passive “shrinking back” is intolerable to God, and when we understand how destructive it is to the soul, we can see why God does not tolerate it. God wants us to “preserve our souls.” That is the role of boundaries; they define and preserve our property, our soul.

I have been told that when a baby bird is ready to hatch, if you break the egg for the bird, it will die. The bird must peck its own way out of the egg into the world. This aggressive “workout” strengthens the bird, allowing it to function in the outside world. Robbed of this responsibility, it will die.

This is also the way God has made us. If he “hatches” us, does our work for us, invades our boundaries, we will die. We must not shrink back passively. Our boundaries can only be created by our being active and aggressive, by our knocking, seeking, and asking (Matt. 7:7–8).

Law 10: The Law of Exposure

A boundary is a property line. It defines where you begin and end. We have been discussing why you need such a line. One reason stands above all the others: You do not exist in a vacuum. You exist in relation to God and others. Your boundaries define you in relation to others.

The whole concept of boundaries has to do with the fact that we exist in relationship. Therefore, boundaries are really about relationship, and finally about love. That’s why the Law of Exposure is so important.

The Law of Exposure says that your boundaries need to be made visible to others and communicated to them in relationship. We have many boundary problems because of relational fears. We are beset by fears of guilt, not being liked, loss of love, loss of connection, loss of approval, receiving anger, being known, and so on. These are all failures in love, and God’s plan is that we learn how to love. These relational problems can only be solved in relationships, for that is the context of the problems themselves, and the context of spiritual existence.

Because of these fears, we try to have secret boundaries. We withdraw passively and quietly instead of communicating an honest no to

someone we love. We secretly resent instead of telling someone that we are angry about how they have hurt us. Often we will privately endure the pain of someone's irresponsibility instead of telling them how their behavior affects us and other loved ones, information that would be helpful to their soul.

In other situations, a partner will secretly comply with her spouse, not offering her feelings or opinions for twenty years, and then suddenly "express" her boundaries by filing for divorce. Or parents will "love" their children by giving in over and over for years, not setting limits, and resenting the love they are showing. The children grow up never feeling loved because of the lack of honesty, and their parents are befuddled, thinking, *After all we've done*.

In these instances, because of unexpressed boundaries, the relationships suffered. An important thing to remember about boundaries is that they exist, and they will affect us, whether or not we communicate them. In the same way that the alien suffered from not knowing the laws of Earth, we suffer when we do not communicate the reality of our boundaries. If our boundaries are not communicated and exposed directly, they will be communicated indirectly or through manipulation.

The Bible speaks to this issue in many places. Listen to the words of Paul: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Eph. 4:25–26). The biblical mandate is *be honest* and *be in the light*. Listen further, "But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: 'Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you'" (Eph. 5:13–14).

The Bible continually speaks of our being in the light and of the light as the only place where we have access to God and others. But because of our fears, we hide aspects of ourselves in the darkness, where the devil has an opportunity. When our boundaries are in the light, that is, are communicated openly, our personalities begin to integrate for the first time. They become "visible," in Paul's words, and

then they become light. They are transformed and changed. Healing always takes place in the light.

David speaks of it in this way: “You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom” (Ps. 51:6 NASB). God wants real relationship with us and wants us to have real relationship with each other. Real relationship means that I am in the light with my boundaries and other aspects of myself that are difficult to communicate. Our boundaries are affected by sin; they “miss the mark” and need to be brought into the light for God to heal them and others to benefit from them. This is the path to real love: Communicate your boundaries openly.

Remember the story of the alien? The good news is that when God brings us out from an alien land, he does not leave us untaught. He rescued his people from the Egyptians, but he taught them his principles and ways. These proved to be life to them. But they had to learn them, practice them, and fight many battles to internalize these principles of faith.

God has probably led you out of captivity also. Whether it was from a dysfunctional family, the world, your own religious self-righteousness, or the scatteredness of being lost, he has been your Redeemer. But what he has secured needs to be possessed. The land to which he has brought you has certain realities and principles. Learn these as set forth in his Word, and you’ll find his kingdom a wonderful place to live.

Taken from Chapter 5 of the 2017 Updated and Expanded Edition of *Boundaires*.

Boundaries

When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life

By Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend

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