



UNDERSTANDING
THE CHOICES
THAT MAKE OR BREAK
LOVING RELATIONSHIPS

BOUNDARIES IN MARRIAGE

DR. HENRY CLOUD & DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

*To all the couples who, with courage, work
out their boundaries in the service of love.*

We want to hear from you. Please send your comments about this
book to us in care of zreview@zondervan.com. Thank you.



Boundaries in Marriage

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A Tale of Two Couples

Recently, I (Dr. Townsend) had two separate dinners with two married couples who are friends of mine. These two couples are in their later years, and each of the couples has been married for more than four decades. They are in what we call the “Golden Years,” the period of marriage in which all the love and work over the years culminate, we hope, in a deep and satisfying connection. However, I was struck by the huge difference between the two couples.

With Harold and Sarah, I enjoyed a buffet dinner where you get a ticket for various parts of the meal and you have to leave the table with your ticket and go get your item. The dinner was winding down; we were ready for dessert. Harold reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his dessert ticket. Tossing it in front of Sarah, he said casually, “Sarah. Dessert.” Not “Please, Sarah, will you get my dessert for me?” And certainly not “Can I get your dessert, honey?” Harold was assuming Sarah would obediently comply with his two-word command.

I didn’t know what to say, so I sat there and watched. Sarah was clearly embarrassed by Harold’s public display of control. She sat there for a couple of seconds, apparently deciding what to do. Then she seemed to gather up her courage and quietly but forcefully said, “Why don’t you get your own dessert?”

Harold looked surprised. Evidently he wasn’t used to her refusing to obey his commands. However, he recovered, made a weak joke about uppity women, and left the table to redeem his ticket. While he was gone, Sarah said to me, “Sorry, I just couldn’t let it go this time, with my friends here.” I felt so sad for Sarah, realizing that her reaction to her husband tonight was the exception rather than the rule. I also realized that, on a deeper level, while Harold and Sarah were legally connected, they were emotionally disconnected. Their hearts were not knit together.

Frank and Julia were different. I was traveling, and they were hosting me. We went to their home after dinner. After a while, it was time for me to return to my hotel, and I needed a ride. Julia, a counselor like me, was primarily responsible for my trip and had been chauffeuring me to various speaking engagements and meetings. So clearly she was the person to take me back.

However, Frank looked at his wife and said, "You look tired, honey. I'll take John back to his hotel." I could see the conflict in Julia's face between her duty to me and her need for rest. Finally, she said, "Okay, thanks." And Frank drove me to the hotel.

The next day, at the conference, I talked to Julia. I remarked on Frank's kindness in offering the ride and on her struggle with taking the offer. She said, "It wasn't always that way. In our twenties, he wouldn't have offered, and I wouldn't have taken the offer. But we worked on this issue a lot during those days. I had to put my foot down on some issues, and we almost divorced. It was a difficult period, but it has paid off. We can't imagine not being each other's soul mates." During my time with them, I had observed that Frank's and Julia's hearts were knit together, that they were emotionally connected.

Though both couples had many years of marriage experience, each couple's love and relationship had taken very different turns. Harold and Sarah were unable to love deeply and relate to each other, because Harold controlled Sarah and Sarah allowed him to control her. They had what are called major boundary conflicts, in which one person crosses the lines of responsibility and respect with another. When one person is in control of another, love cannot grow deeply and fully, as there is no freedom.

Frank and Julia could have very likely ended up the same way. From what I could tell, they started off similarly in their early married years. Frank dominated, and Julia complied. However, she confronted the problem, she set limits and established consequences, and their marriage grew. Clearly, both couples were reaping the results of how they had conducted themselves in the earlier seasons of marriage. The first couple harvested a sad result; the other, a joyous one.

Your Life Begins Today

If you are reading this book, most likely marriage is important to you. You may be happy in your marriage and want it to keep growing. You may be struggling and dealing with major or minor problems. You may be single and want to prepare for marriage. You may be divorced and want to prevent the pain you went through if you remarry.

Most of us have no greater desire and prayer than a lifetime of love and commitment to one person with whom we can share life. Marriage is one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. It is the mystery of living as one flesh with another human being (Ephesians 5:31–32).

Marriage is first and foremost about love. It is bound together by the care, need, companionship, and values of two people, which can overcome hurt, immaturity, and selfishness to form something better than what each person alone can produce. Love is at the heart of marriage, as it is at the heart of God himself (1 John 4:16).

Yet, love is not enough. The marriage relationship needs other ingredients to grow and thrive. Those ingredients are *freedom* and *responsibility*. When two people are free to disagree, they are free to love. When they are not free, they live in fear, and love dies: "Perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). And when two people together take responsibility to do what is best for the marriage, love can grow. When they do not, one takes on too much responsibility and resents it; the other does not take on enough and becomes self-centered or controlling. Freedom and responsibility problems in a marriage will cause love to struggle. Like a plant without good soil, the marriage relationship will struggle in an unfriendly environment.

Boundaries in Marriage is fundamentally about love. It is about promoting it, growing it, developing it, and repairing it.

*When two people
are free to disagree,
they are free to love.
When they are not
free, they live in
fear, and love dies.*

We want to help you develop love through providing a better environment for it: one of freedom and responsibility. This is where boundaries, or personal property lines, come in. They promote love by protecting individuals.

We wrote *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No, To Take Control of Your Life* several years ago because we saw

*Today is the day
to work on your
own boundaries
in marriage.*

that many people's personal and spiritual conflicts had to do with a lack of structure and boundaries. They couldn't say no to controlling or irresponsible people, and so they were always controlled by others' demands on them. However, many people have asked us since then, "Why don't you

write a book on setting limits in one's marriage, so that we can solve problems before they start?" We thought that was a good idea, and this book is the result.

As you will see, character is key here. When people grow in character, they grow in the ability to set and receive boundaries in their marriages, and they mature. When they resist hearing the word *no*, they remain immature.

Many people believe that as we humans grow up physically, we automatically grow up emotionally as well, but that's simply not true. Age is a necessary but insufficient requirement for growing up. There are immature old people, and there are appropriately mature young people. Harold and Sarah are still dealing immaturely with old, old boundary issues. Frank and Julia have resolved them and have gone to much deeper stages of love and maturity. The point we are trying to make here is that today is the day to work on your own boundaries in marriage. As the Bible teaches, make the most of today, for the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16). What you take initiative to deal with today will affect the rest of your married life. And what you ignore or are afraid to address will do the same. You're headed toward either a Harold and Sarah marriage, or a Frank and Julia one, and you are doing that right now.

You may both be open to the concept of setting and receiving truth and boundaries with each other. This openness will make the process much easier, as you will be on the same page with regard to both values and personal growth. Or you may have a spouse who is against boundaries. This close-mindedness can be dealt with also.

An Overview

We have structured the book into several parts. Part I, “Understanding Boundaries,” introduces you to the idea of (or gives you a refresher course on) boundaries and how to set them in your marriage and with yourself. Part II, “Building Boundaries in Marriage,” deals with the necessity of two separate lives becoming united, with the fundamental beliefs that undergird a marriage of boundaries, and with how to set boundaries against outside people and influences. Part III, “Resolving Conflict in Marriage,” describes six types of conflict and how to set limits with a spouse who accepts boundaries and with one who resists boundaries. Part IV, “Misunderstanding Boundaries in Marriage,” looks at some of the ways boundaries can be misused.

Boundaries in Marriage is not about fixing, changing, or punishing your mate.

These sections provide practical information, examples, tables, and suggestions to help you apply boundaries concepts to your marriage.

Clarifying a Misconception

We need to make clear, however, that *Boundaries in Marriage* is not about fixing, changing, or punishing your mate. If you aren't in control of yourself, the solution is not learning to control someone else. The solution is learning self-control, one of the nine fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). So don't look at this book as a way to make someone else grow up. It is more about taking ownership of your own life so that you are protected and

you can love and protect your spouse without enabling or rescuing him or her.

So welcome to *Boundaries in Marriage!* We hope this is a helpful resource for you, whatever condition your marriage is in. We pray that as you learn to make the word *no* a good word in your marriage, responsibility and freedom will then help love take deep roots in both of your hearts. God bless you.

HENRY CLOUD, PH.D.

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NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA

1999

Part One

Understanding Boundaries

What's a Boundary, Anyway?

Stephanie sat in front of the fireplace drinking her cup of herbal tea and reflecting upon the evening. Her husband, Steve, had gone to bed an hour earlier, but the gnawing feeling in her stomach prevented her from joining him. In fact, the feeling was propelling her away from him. She was relieved when he had said that he was tired, for she didn't know what she would have done if he had wanted to make love to her. The feeling of relief scared her. She knew that it was not a good sign for their relationship.

As she thought about the night, she found herself connecting her feelings not only with what had happened this evening, but with what had gone on in their relationship in the last few years. She was pulling away from Steve more and more. She knew that she loved him and always would love him. She just didn't know how to get past the lack of attraction to him. She had a negative feeling about their relationship that she could not shake.

"Get specific. What is it?" she could hear her friend Jill asking her. Jill was much better at sorting out thoughts and feelings than Stephanie.

As she sorted through answers to Jill's question in her mind, the answer came surprisingly quickly in a movie-like collage of memories. Times and conversations she and Steve had had passed through her mind as though she were a detached observer. First, she recalled this evening, when he had ignored her wishes for where they would go to dinner. And several times

during the meal he had ignored what she was saying. It was as if he did not really hear her.

Then there was their vacation. She had wanted a nice quiet mountain setting where they could be alone together. He had wanted a big city with “lots of action.” As usual, they had followed his wishes.

Then there was her desire to go back to school and finish her degree. They had agreed on that when she had dropped out of college her senior year to put him through law school. But every time she brought it up, he explained why it was not a good time right now for them. Stephanie had a hard time understanding that. What he really was saying was that it was not a good time *for him*.

Many other scenes came to her mind, but that phrase—“for him”—seemed to encapsulate all of them: Their relationship was more “for him” than it was “for them,” or even “for her.” As she thought about it, her detachment gave way to anger and contempt. Quickly, she retreated from such a negative feeling.

Get a grip, she told herself. *Love is filled with sacrifice*. But, as much as she tried to see herself sacrificing for love, she felt as if she were sacrificing a lot, yet experiencing very little love.

With that thought, she stared into the fire awhile longer, gulped her last sip of tea, and headed for bed, hoping Steve would be asleep.

The Importance of Boundaries

How had Stephanie, after several years of marriage, found herself in such a state? What had gone wrong? She and Steve had begun so strong. He was everything she had always wanted. Kind, strong, successful, and spiritual, Steve seemed to embody it all. But as time went on, their relationship lacked depth and intimacy. She could not understand how she could love someone so much and experience such little love along the way.

The issues are different for many couples, but the perplexity is often the same. One spouse feels something is missing, but she can't figure out what it is. She tries to do the right things. She gives, sacrifices, honors the commitment, and believes the

best. And yet she doesn't achieve intimacy, or worse than that, she doesn't avoid pain.

In some cases, the confusion hides itself behind the simplistic explanations that problems such as addiction, irresponsibility, control, or abuse provide. "If he just weren't so controlling." Or, "If she just would stop spending." Partners think that they can explain why their relationship lacks intimacy by the presence of "the problem." They are surprised to find that even when the "problem" goes away, the person with whom they can't connect or find love remains.

In other cases, there may be no "problems," but the marriage does not live up to the promise that one or both of the partners had in the beginning. Commitment may be strong, but love, intimacy, and deep sharing are not present. Why does this happen with two people who are so committed to the relationship?

In our work with couples over the years, we have observed that, while many dynamics go into producing and maintaining love, over and over again one issue is at the top of the list: boundaries. When boundaries are not established in the beginning of a marriage, or when they break down, marriages break down as well. Or such marriages don't grow past the initial attraction and transform into real intimacy. They never reach the true "knowing" of each other and the ongoing ability to abide in love and to grow as individuals and as a couple—the long-term fulfillment that was God's design. For this intimacy to develop and grow, there must be boundaries.

So, with that in mind, in this chapter we are going to take a big-picture look at what boundaries are. We will give an introductory course for those of you who have never read our book *Boundaries* and a refresher course for those of you who have.

What *is* a boundary? In the simplest sense, a boundary is a property line. It denotes the beginning and end of something. If, for example, you go down to the county courthouse and look up your address, you can probably get a plot map showing your property lines. You can see where your property begins and your neighbor's ends—a prerequisite for being good neighbors to each other.

Ownership

If you know where the property lines are, you can look up who *owns* the land. In physical property, we say that Sam or Susie “owns” the land and the things on the land.

In relationships, ownership is also very important. If I know where the boundaries are in our relationship, I know who “owns” things such as feelings, attitudes, and behaviors as well. I know to whom they “belong.” And if there is a problem with one of those, I know to whom the problem belongs as well. A relationship like marriage requires each partner to have a sense of ownership of himself or herself.

I (Dr. Cloud) witnessed this lack of ownership in a couple recently. Caroline and Joe came in for marriage counseling saying that they could not stop arguing with one another. When I asked her what the arguments were about, Caroline replied, “He is just so angry all the time. He gets so mad at me that it really hurts; he is so mean sometimes.”

I turned to Joe and asked, “Why do you get so mad?”

Without having to think for a second, he replied, “Because she always tries to control me and my life.”

Sensing that this could become a game of Ping-Pong, I looked to the other side of the table and asked Caroline, “Why do you try to control him?”

Again, in a millisecond, she replied, “Because he is so into his own things that I can’t get his time or attention.” Each of them blamed their own behavior on the other person.

Sensing that they might see the humor in what they were doing if I continued, I asked, “Why do you not pay attention to her?”

“Because she is so nagging and controlling—I just have to get away from her,” he instantly shot back.

Trying one last time to have someone take ownership for his or her own behavior, I asked her why she nags. Without missing a beat, she answered, “Because he won’t do anything I want.”

I wanted them to see my head moving back and forth whenever I asked the question “Why do you . . . ?” The answer given

was always something about the other person. The ball of ownership was hit back over the net each time it landed in one of their courts. Neither one ever took personal ownership of his or her behavior. In their minds, their behavior was literally “caused” by the other person.

I longed for Joe to say, for example, “I get angry at her because I’m too immature to respond to her more helpfully. I’m deeply sorry for that and need some help. I want to be able to love her correctly no matter what her behavior is. Can you help me?” This response would be music to a counselor’s ears. But, with this couple, we were a long way from the symphony.

I felt as if I were in the bleachers in the Garden of Eden when God confronted Adam after he had sinned (see Genesis 3:1–13). Adam had chosen to disobey God’s command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. There was no doubt about it, Adam had done it. When God asked what had happened, he got the same lack of ownership we saw with Caroline and Joe.

“Who told you that you were naked?” God asked. “Have you eaten from the tree I commanded you not to eat from?”

The ball of ownership was hit back over the net each time it landed in one of their courts. Neither one ever took personal ownership of his or her behavior.

“The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree,” Adam said, “and I ate it.” Adam blamed his behavior on his wife. Just like Joe; just like all of us. “I did _____ *because* of you.” And God ran into the same problem with Eve. When he asked her about her behavior, look what happened:

“What is this you have done?” God asked.

“The serpent deceived me, and I ate,” Eve replied. Eve’s behavior and disobedience get explained away on account of the serpent. “If it weren’t for the serpent. . . .”

In essence, Caroline and Joe, like Adam and Eve, and like you and me, were saying, “If it were not for you, I would be a more loving, responsible person.”

So the first way in which clarifying boundaries helps us is to know where one person ends and the other begins. What is the problem, and where is it? Is it in you, or is it in me? Once we know the boundaries, we know who should be owning whichever problem we are wrestling with. For example, Joe was not taking ownership of his feelings, and Caroline, of her behavior. This issue of “ownership” is vital to any relationship, especially marriage.

Responsibility

Boundaries help us to determine who is responsible for what. If we understand who owns what, we then know who must take responsibility for it. If I could get Joe to see that his reactions were his problem and not Caroline’s, then I could help him to

If we can see that the problem is our problem and that we are responsible for it, then we are in the driver’s seat of change. For the first time, we are empowered.

take responsibility for changing his reactions. As long as he blamed Caroline for his reactions, then she had to change for his reactions to change. In his mind, if she were not so controlling, for example, he would not be so angry.

If we can discover who is responsible for what, we have an opportunity for change. If we can see that the problem is our problem and that we are responsible for it, then we are in the driver’s seat of change. For the first time, we are empowered. When Caroline got a sense that she was responsible for the misery she thought Joe was causing, she was empowered to change that helpless, powerless feeling of misery, *no matter what Joe was doing*. Once she began to take responsibility for her reactions to Joe, she could work on changing them. For example, she learned not to let his anger

affect her and to respond to him more directly. She also learned to stop nagging him to do things, and instead to ask him to do something and give him choices.

Responsibility also involves action. If something is going to happen, it's going to happen because we take action. We need to change some attitudes, or behaviors, or reactions, or choices. We must actively participate in the resolution of whatever relational problem we might have, even if it is not our fault.

Once Joe saw that his anger was his problem and not Caroline's, he took responsibility for it. He learned he was not going to be "not angry" because Caroline changed. He was going to be "not angry" because he grew and responded differently to what she did. He learned what Proverbs teaches

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us—that a lack of boundaries and anger go hand in hand: "Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit" (Proverbs 25:28 NASB). He learned not to react, but to think through his choices, to find where his anger and feelings of being threatened by her were coming from. Many other new things became part of his growth, but they all began with boundaries, with clarifying what he had to take responsibility for.

Each spouse must take responsibility for the following things:

- Feelings
- Attitudes
- Behaviors
- Choices
- Limits
- Desires
- Thoughts
- Values
- Talents
- Love

Responsibility tells us we are the ones who must work through our feelings and learn how to feel differently. *Our* attitudes—not those of our spouse—cause us to feel distressed and powerless. How we behave and react is part of the problem, and we have to change these patterns. We allow ourselves to get pushed beyond certain limits and then become resentful or powerless. We do not turn desires into accomplished goals, or we do not deal with our sick desires.

Responsibility empowers us to have a good life. To give Adam and Eve the responsibility God gave them was to empower them to have the life all of us desire—one filled with love, wonderful surroundings, and lots of opportunities to use our abilities and talents. He gave them the ability and the opportunity to make the life they chose. When they did not choose in a life-giving way, they also bore the responsibility for that choice as well, just as we do.

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spouse's behavior
or problems.*

But the good news of boundaries is that God's plan of responsibility has not changed. We are not at the mercy of our spouse's behavior or problems. Each spouse can act both to avoid being a victim of the other spouse's problems and, better yet, *to change the marriage relationship itself*. Later in this book we will show you how to change your marriage for the better, even if your spouse is not interested in changing. But the process always begins with taking responsibility for your own part in the problem.

Freedom

"His irresponsibility is making my life miserable," Jen began. She then went on to tell me a terrible story of how her husband had successfully avoided adulthood for many years at her expense. She had suffered greatly at the hands of his behavior, both financially and sexually.

As I listened, though, I could see that her deep sense of hopelessness kept her in prison. I could see countless ways she could be free from her husband's patterns of behavior. She could make

numerous choices to help both herself and the relationship. But the sad thing was that she could not see the same choices that were so clear to me.

“Why don’t you stop paying for his mistakes and bailing him out? Why do you keep rescuing him from the messes he gets himself into?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?” Jen asked, alternating between muffled sobs and a scornful expression. “There’s nothing I can do. This is the way he is, and I just have to live with it.”

I could not tell if she was sad about what she perceived as a hopeless case or angry with me for suggesting she had choices.

As we talked further, I discovered an underlying problem that kept Jen from making such choices.

She did not experience herself as a free agent. It never occurred to her that she had the freedom to respond, to make choices, to limit the ways his behavior affected her. She felt that she was a victim of whatever he did or did not do.

She did not experience herself as a free agent. It never occurred to her that she had the freedom to respond, to make choices, to limit the ways his behavior affected her.

This was the same problem troubling Joe and causing him to react so severely to Caroline. She would attempt to control him, and he would experience her attempts as *actually* controlling him. In reality, Caroline had no control over Joe whatsoever, and had he understood

that, he would not have been so reactive to her. He did not see himself as a free agent.

God designed the entire creation for freedom. We were not meant to be enslaved by each other; we were meant to love each other freely. God designed us to have freedom of choice as we responded to life, to other people, to God, and to ourselves. But when we turned from God, we lost our freedom. We became enslaved to sin, to self-centeredness, to other people, to guilt, and to a whole host of other dynamics.

Boundaries help us to realize our freedom once again. Listen to the way that Paul tells the Galatians to set boundaries against any type of control and become free: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not

Just as your next-door neighbor can't force you to paint your house purple, neither can any other human being make you do anything.

be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1 NASB). Jen felt herself enslaved by her husband's patterns of behavior and did not see the choices available to her. Joe saw himself as subject to Caroline's nagging attempts to control him. But God tells us to not be subject to any kind of enslaving control at all.

When someone realizes the freedom he or she has from a spouse or anyone else, many options open up.

Boundaries help us to know just where someone's control begins and ends. As with the property lines above, so it is with relationships. Just as your next-door neighbor can't force you to paint your house purple, neither can any other human being make you do anything. It violates the basic law of freedom God established in the universe. For love to work, each spouse has to realize his or her freedom. And boundaries help define the freedom we have and the freedom we do not have.

Marriage is not slavery. It is based on a love relationship deeply rooted in freedom. Each partner is free *from* the other and therefore free *to love* the other. Where there is control, or perception of control, there is not love. Love only exists where there is freedom.

The Triangle of Boundaries

Three realities have existed since the beginning of time:

1. Freedom
2. Responsibility
3. Love

God created us free. He gave us responsibility for our freedom. And as responsible free agents, we are told to love him and each other. This emphasis runs throughout the whole Bible. When we do these three things—live free, take responsibility for our own freedom, and love God and each other—then life, including marriage, can be an Eden experience.

Something incredible happens as these three ingredients of relationship work together. As love grows, spouses become more free from the things that enslave: self-centeredness, sinful patterns, past hurts, and other self-imposed limitations. Then, they gain a greater and greater sense of self-control and responsibility. As they act more responsibly, they become more loving. And then the cycle begins all over again. As love grows, so does freedom, leading to more responsibility, and to more love.

This is why a couple who has been married for fifty or more years can say that the marriage gets better and better as time goes on. They become more free to be themselves as a result of being loved, and the love relationship deepens.

One woman said it this way: “Before I married Tom, I was so caught up in my own insecurities and fears to really even know who I was. I have been so blessed by the way he loved me. When I was afraid or irresponsible in the early years, he was patient, not reactive. He was strong enough to love me and require more of me at the same time. He did not let me get away with being like I was, but he never punished me for how I was, either. I had to begin to take responsibility for working through my barriers to love. I could not blame him for my faults. As he loved me more and more, I was able to change and let go of the ways that I was.”

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where there is
freedom.*

The really neat thing was that as I talked to this woman's husband, he said basically the same thing. Both had become a catalyst for growth for the other and for the relationship as well.

In this description we can see the three legs of the triangle. The spouses were free to not react to the other, they each took responsibility for their own issues, and they loved the other

person even when he or she did not deserve it. She worked on her insecurities and changed them. And as they were both free from the other, they gave love to each other freely. And that love continued to transform and produce growth.

Remember, where there is no freedom, there is slavery, and where there is slavery, there will be rebellion. Also, where there is no responsibility, there is bondage. Where we do not take ownership and do what we are supposed to do with our own stuff, we will be stuck at a certain level of relationship, and we will not be able to go deeper.

Love can only exist where freedom and responsibility are operating. Love creates more freedom that leads to more responsibility, which leads to more and more ability to love.

Protection

The last aspect of boundaries that makes love grow is protection. Think of your house for a moment. You probably have some protection around your property somewhere. Some of you have a fence with a locked gate, for example, to protect your property from trespassers. Some people, if they were able, would come in and steal things that matter to you. As Jesus said, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces” (Matthew 7:6). You need to be careful and to protect yourself from evil.

Some of you do not have a fence, but you lock your doors instead. However you do it, you have a protective boundary available when needed to keep “bad guys” out. But your locked gate or door is not a wall, either. You need to be able to be open the gate or door when you want to invite “good guys” onto your property or into the house. In other words, boundaries need to be permeable. They need to keep the bad out and allow the good in.

As it is with your house, so it is with your soul. You need protective boundaries that you can put up when evil is present and can let down when the danger is over.

Regina had had enough. Married to Lee for nineteen years, she had tried to be loving until it had almost killed her emotionally. Lee had a long-standing problem with alcohol and also with anger. Sometimes the two problems would come together and make life unbearable for her. In addition, he would pick at her in an emotionally devastating way with biting, sarcastic remarks. “Nice dress—didn’t they have it in your size?” was the kind of thing he would say. He would not help her with the kids either, seeing it as the “wife’s job.”

She was an adapting, loving person who had always tried to avoid conflict and to win people over with love. When people were mean, she would become nicer and try to love them more. The problem with Lee was that her love only gave him more and more permission to be unloving himself. His drinking and other behaviors continued to get more and more pronounced, and she finally could not take it anymore.

She discovered that it was not good to be the silent sufferer. Some people at her church encouraged her to speak up to Lee about how his problems affected her. She took some courses on assertiveness and began to confront him.

Sadly, Lee did not listen. Sometimes he ignored her confrontations, at other times he apologized without changing, and at still other times he grew angry and defensive. But at no time did he take her words to heart, see how he was hurting her, and change.

Regina finally gave Lee a choice to own his problem and take responsibility for it, or to move out. She would no longer allow his drinking and anger to affect her and the children. She would take protective steps to “guard the good” and not let evil destroy it.

At first he did not believe her, but she stood her ground. Finally, he moved out. Had he not done so, she might have moved out herself or gone to court. But, seeing for the first time that his behavior had consequences, Lee took his problem seriously. He obtained some help and turned his life around. He and Regina were reconciled a year and a half later, and their marriage was saved.

Regina was happy that they were back together and that the marriage was doing well. This was a fruit of the protective stance she had so painfully taken. She had set some limits and boundaries to protect herself, her children, and ultimately her marriage from a destructive cycle.

Self-Control

There is a lot of misunderstanding about boundaries. Some people are against boundaries because they see them as selfish; other people actually use them to be selfish. Both are wrong. Boundaries are basically about self-control.

A client once said to me, “I set some boundaries *on my husband*. I told him that he could not talk to me that way anymore. And it did not work. What do I do now?”

“What you have done is not boundaries at all,” I replied.

“What do you mean?”

“It was your feeble attempt at controlling your husband, and that never works.” I went on to explain that boundaries are not something you “set on” another person. Boundaries are about yourself.

My client could not say to her husband, “You can’t speak to me that way.” This demand is unenforceable. But she could say what she would or would not do if he spoke to her that way again. She could set a boundary “on herself.” She could say, “If you speak to me that way, I will walk out of the room.” This threat

Boundaries are not something you “set on” another person.

Boundaries are about yourself.

is totally enforceable because it has to do with *her*. She would be setting a boundary with the only person she could control: herself.

When you build a fence around your yard, you do not build it to figure out the boundaries of your neighbor’s yard so that you can dictate to him how he is to behave.

You build it around your own yard so that you can maintain control of what happens to your own property. Personal boundaries do the same. If someone tres-

passes your personal boundaries in some way, you can take control of yourself and not allow yourself to be controlled, or hurt, anymore. This is self-control.

And ultimately, self-control serves love, not selfishness. We hope that when you take control of yourself, you will love better and more purposefully and intentionally so that you and your spouse can have the intimacy you desire.

Examples of Boundaries

In the physical world, many boundaries define property and protect it. Fences surround homes. Homes are built in gated communities. Most homes have doors and locks. In the old days, people even had moats with alligators.

In the immaterial world of souls and relationships, boundaries are different. You would look funny with a moat around your heart, and the alligators would require a lot of maintenance. So God has equipped us with special boundaries for the interpersonal realm. Let's look at some.

Words

The most basic boundary is language. Your words help define you. They tell the other person who you are, what you believe, what you want, and what you don't. Here are some examples of words being used as boundaries:

- No, I don't want to do that.
- No, I won't participate in that.
- Yes, I want to do that.
- I will.
- I like that.
- I don't like that.

Your words, or lack of them, define you to another person. Remember Stephanie, the wife in the opening illustration of this chapter who was pulling away from her husband, Steve? Stephanie slowly lost ground on her property by not saying what she wanted and what she did and did not like about how Steve was acting. Her silence was like a trampled-down fence.

Truth

Truth is another important boundary. God's truth and principles provide the boundaries of our existence, and as we live within this truth, we are safe. Here are some truths that help define the structure of how we are to relate:

- Do not lie.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not covet.
- Give to others.
- Love one another.
- Be compassionate.
- Forgive.

As we structure our relationships around God's eternal truths, our relationships succeed and thrive. When we cross these boundaries, we lose the security that truth provides.

In addition, being honest and truthful about ourselves and what is going on in a relationship provides boundaries. Not being truthful to one another gives a false impression of where we are, as well as who we are. For example, when Regina was adapting to Lee's hurtful behavior, she wasn't being honest with him about what was really going on inside of her. She was acting happy and loving, but in reality she was miserable inside and hurting deeply.

As Paul says, "Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25). If we are not being truthful with each other, our real relationship goes into hiding. Then, instead of one real relationship, we have two relationships: the outside relationship, which is false; and the inside, hidden relationship, which is true. Intimacy is lost, and so is love. Love and truth must exist together.

Consequences

When Regina had had "enough," she finally set the boundary of consequences. She said she would no longer live with Lee

while he drank. This consequence defined the boundary of what she would allow herself to be exposed to. Where her words failed to communicate, her actions did. She kicked him out.

God has given us the Law of Sowing and Reaping (see chapter 2 for a fuller explanation of this law) to communicate what is acceptable and what is not. If we just use words, others sometimes do not “get the message.” In fact, people in denial are deaf to words of truth. They only respond to pain and loss. Consequences show where our boundary line is.

People in denial are deaf to words of truth. They only respond to pain and loss.

Some spouses need severe consequences like separation. Others need less severe ones, like the following, to define important boundaries:

- Canceling a credit card
- Leaving for the party alone when the perpetually late partner doesn't come home by the agreed upon departure time
- Going ahead and eating dinner when a spouse is late for the thousandth time
- Ending an abusive conversation
- Refusing to bail someone out of a jam because of perpetual irresponsibility, like overspending or not completing work on time.

Emotional Distance

Sometimes one of the partners in a hurtful relationship is not willing to change. The partner continues to do hurtful things. Or, sometimes a spouse may have betrayed a trust or had an affair, and even though he has repented, not enough time has passed for the spouse to prove himself trustworthy.

In these situations, trust may not be wise. But it is prudent to continue to interact in the relationship and to work the problem out. In such instances, one partner might have to follow the

advice of Proverbs to avoid further injury: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Proverbs 4:23). Guarding one’s heart might include saying the following:

- I love you, but I don’t trust you. I can’t be that close until we work this out.
- When you can be kind, we can be close again.
- When you show you are serious about getting some help, I will feel safe enough to open up to you again.
- I can’t share deep feelings if you are going to punish me for them.

In these instances, the couple has a commitment to work on things along with the wisdom to guard the heart with some emotional distance until it is safe and prudent to move closer. This prevents further hurt and deterioration of the relationship.

We caution you, however, that you must take this stance only with a pure heart. Impure hearts use boundaries to act out feelings such as revenge and anger. Because none of us is pure, we have to search our motives for establishing boundaries to make sure that they serve love and not our impure motives. Using distance or withdrawal of love, for example, to punish the other is a sign that we are setting boundaries not to resolve the conflict, but to get revenge.

Impure hearts use boundaries to act out feelings such as revenge and anger.

Physical Distance

Sometimes, when all else fails, people must get away from each other until the hurt can stop. Distance can provide time to protect, time to think, time to heal, and time to learn new things. In severe cases, protective separation prevents actual danger. Physical distance can be minimal, or more significant:

- Removing oneself from an argument or heated situation
- Taking some time away from one another to sort things out

- Moving out to get treatment for an addiction
- Separating from physical abuse or substance abuse
- Moving into a shelter to protect children

These boundaries protect the marriage and the spouse from further harm. As Proverbs tells us, “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it” (Proverbs 27:12). Physical distance at times provides space for healing as well as safety to preserve partners and the marriage itself. Although usually a last resort, it is sometimes the thing that saves.

Other People

Sandy could not stand up to Jerry alone. Every time she tried to set boundaries with him, she folded in the heat of conflict. She did not yet have the spine she needed. He was always able to overpower her.

I suggested that she talk about certain issues with him only while I was present. At first she saw that as a cop-out and would not give herself permission to do it. But after a few more failures, she agreed that she was just unable.

Sandy limited herself to discussing the difficult topics only in their counseling sessions. Slowly she was able to depend upon me to monitor and intervene when Jerry got out of hand. As that happened, the boundaries I provided in structuring the sessions gave the marriage a new path. He began to respond.

Later, she went to her support group for the rest of the structure she needed to gain her own boundaries. Other people were the “spine” she did not have in the beginning. Slowly she internalized their care, support, teaching, and modeling. God has always provided help from his family to those who need it. Here are some ways:

- Use a third party to help you resolve conflict.
- Use a third party to help you protect and support yourself.
- Use a group for healing and strengthening.
- Use others to teach you boundaries.

- Use counselors, friends, or pastors to provide the safe place to work on difficult issues.
- Use shelters in extreme situations.

Take care, however, that other people are helping and not hurting. Other people may be unhelpful if they help you hide from conflict instead of trying to resolve it. We will cover this point in chapter 11 on protecting your marriage from intruders.

Time

Time is another boundary that structures difficulties in relationships. Some people need time to work out a conflict or to limit the conflict itself:

- Give yourself an allotted time to talk about certain things: “We will discuss our budget for one hour, and then we will leave it alone until next week.”
- Set a certain time to work on a particular issue instead of discussing it in the heat of the moment.
- Establish seasons for certain goals: “This summer we will work on our communication, and in the fall work on our sexual difficulties.”

Just as the physical world has different kinds of boundaries, the interpersonal world has different ones as well. Just as sometimes a fence is appropriate and a door is not, sometimes confrontation and truth are important and physical distance is not. Later in this book, in Part III, we will guide you through how to know when to do what.

Stephanie

Stephanie, with whom we opened this chapter, was not experiencing the more serious problems with Steve that some of our other couples have revealed. She was suffering, however, from the emotional distance that being on the wrong end of a one-sided relationship creates. In some ways her story is more revealing of the need for good boundaries in a marriage. She was

unhappy in the face of no overt problems. This can sometimes be the worst kind of misery.

Her story has a good ending. And it incorporates all the principles we have looked at in this chapter.

Stephanie first figured out where she ended and where Steve began. When she did, she found that there was really very little of her at all in the marriage. She had adapted to him and had complied with his wishes so much that she barely existed at all. She could no longer even remember what it felt like to be herself. Her desires for school and some meaningful work of her own were long forgotten as he pressured her to continue to go on as they were. And she had given in over and over until she lost herself.

When she thought about what was hers and what was his, she realized that she could not blame him for her loss of herself. She was the one who had complied with his wishes. She was the one who was afraid of conflict and so chose to adapt to what he wanted. She had to take ownership of her passivity.

At this point in her journey Stephanie made a mature decision. She took responsibility for her own misery and began to *work on it in the relationship*. Instead of doing what many compliant people do when they wake up and find themselves lost, she didn't leave the relationship "to find herself." Many times a marriage will break up as the passive spouse decides she wants to have "a life of her own." And she leaves. Sometimes she may even call this move "getting some boundaries." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Boundaries are only built and established in the context of relationship. To run from a relationship as the first step of boundaries is not to have boundaries at all. It is a defense against

The passive spouse decides she wants to have "a life of her own." And she leaves. She may even call this move "getting some boundaries." Nothing could be further from the truth.

developing boundaries with another person. The only place boundaries are real is within relationship.

Stephanie did not run. She took ownership of all of her feelings, attitudes, desires, and choices, and then she took them to Steve. And they had lots of conflict at first. But in the end, he grew as well. Steve found out that life was not about just him and that, if he continued to live that way, he was going to lose some things very important to him, like closeness with Stephanie. As she took responsibility for her life, he was forced to take responsibility for his own, and the marriage improved.

They both owned their sides of the equation. Stephanie saw that she was free from Steve and that the slavery she had always felt was coming from inside of her. She expressed her feelings and opinions more. She would not just give in to Steve's desires immediately. When he did not hear her, she let him know. And Steve learned to love her freedom and relish it. He began to feel attracted to her independence instead of threatened by it. As they did these things, love grew. And they grew as individuals as well.

But it had all started with Stephanie doing some serious boundary work: defining herself, taking ownership and responsibility for what was hers, realizing her freedom, making some choices, doing the hard work of change in the relationship and not away from it, and learning to love instead of comply.

Stephanie's relationship with Steve grew more and more intimate. They learned how to be separate people who were free to love each another. The missing ingredient all along had been a deep sense of intimacy, something the Bible refers to as "knowing" someone. But without clear boundaries, they could not know each other, and without knowing each other, they could not truly love each other.

As they each became more defined, they became two people who could love and be loved. They began to know and enjoy one another. They began to grow.

This is what we would like for you and your spouse. In this book we will help you become better defined, more free and responsible, and more in a position to love and be loved. This is the high calling God created marriage to be.

Boundaries in Marriage

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