

Chapter Thirteen

SETTING BOUNDARIES



If you have ever seen the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, you have witnessed what it means to be raised without boundaries. (If you haven't seen it, watch it after you read this chapter!) It is a truly funny movie, but it leaves you unsettled at the prospect of the family dynamics. Everybody in the movie had an opinion, and they had no problem imposing those opinions on others. Individuality was lost in the conglomerate of the family. Manipulation to get one's way was elevated to a fine art. Resentments and payback seethed, along with the laughter and family affection that was present.



When you are raised in dysfunction, you don't know what you don't know. This is particularly true of boundaries. Unlike overt abuse, which becomes obviously wrong as the child grows older, the invasion of boundaries is subtle. So, what is a personal boundary? According to Dr. Cloud, author of the book *Boundaries*, "*Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership. Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom.*"



A visual that defines a healthy boundary is our skin. It keeps our innards intact, protects us against germs, and defines our bodies in relation to the rest of our environment. Boundaries operate in this way. Personal boundaries define us, our values, our thoughts, and our spirits. They keep us safe and intact. They keep bad things from coming in. Just like emotions, boundaries—healthy or unhealthy—are learned. If your parents respected your opinions, allowed you to make choices and experience the consequences, corrected you when you were pushing your opinions on your siblings, or the myriad of other things that constitute healthy boundaries growing up, you probably innately have healthy boundaries because you speak the "language." Sadly, this is not true for many of us. I was raised in a big, boisterous family with lots of fun, but no boundaries. Our opinions were scorned if they did not match

our parents' opinions. Each child's issues were freely discussed among all the siblings. We knew what was best for others' lives, and we had no problem pushing it on them. Manipulation was used in place of honest dialogue. For me personally, as I got older, the lack of boundaries led to very difficult relationships at work and home. I didn't know anything about boundaries, but I sure experienced the damage from not having them!

WHAT DO HEALTHY BOUNDARIES LOOK LIKE?

The most obvious boundary violation is when someone does not accept your "no." Their ability to push and cajole you into saying "yes" shows that they lack boundaries. But the person who changes her "no" to a "yes," even though she does not have time or simply does not want to do what is asked, also has boundary issues. What results is that she says yes, performs the task, but all the while resents it. Not setting boundaries and holding people accountable leads to feeling used and mistreated. Sometimes that can morph into feeling like a victim. What is the truth? You allowed it. You are responsible for your own actions. As Dr. Cloud says, "*You get what you tolerate.*"



JUST SAY “NO”

It sounds simple. You know, “just say no.” But it is much more complicated than this, because setting boundaries is often enmeshed with our unmet needs or the roles we were “assigned” in our families of origin. In my family, my sister’s role was that of the caretaker. In our early years, our mom was emotionally unstable, and she depended on my older sister to keep things running as smoothly as possible. I have a black-and-white photo of us from when I was three and she was four (we are fourteen months apart). My nickname was Porky—not very nice but definitely descriptive of me. My sister, who was always smaller than me, was holding me on her lap, rocking and comforting me. It is comical to look at this picture because I am like a Sumo toddler squashing my scrawny sister beneath me. But it is also very telling because even at that young age, she was cast into her role as the caretaker, and it followed her throughout much of her adulthood. When our mom was in her eighties, she was in an assisted living facility close to my sister’s home. Mom had no problem calling Denise up at 7:00 a.m. and telling her she needed milk for her cereal: “Would you please bring it right away?” My sister would drop what she was doing, go buy milk, and take it to her. If it wasn’t milk, it was the newspaper or retrieving something under the bed for her or making her oatmeal. While my sister resented this intrusion immensely, it never occurred to her that she could say no. My role in the family was different. I was the irresponsible and impetuous one. My mom called me once and asked me to call someone for her. I blurted out, “Mom, are your fingers broken?” There were no more calls like that from her to me! The dynamic is like Velcro. My sister was the loop side, and my mom was the fuzzy side, and when Mom manipulated her, it stuck to her like Velcro. I, on the other hand, didn’t have that role imposed on me, so Mom’s fuzzy Velcro hit a smooth surface and wouldn’t stick. Fortunately, my sister eventually figured out that she could say no (in a kinder way than me), and she learned to set boundaries with Mom. At first Mom resisted, but she finally capitulated, and my sister was then free to enjoy our otherwise funny and delightful mom without the anger and resentment!

SAYING “YES” TO BAD THINGS

Boundary issues aren’t just about an inability to say “no.” They encompass saying “yes” to things that are bad for us. When children are raised with their voices and opinions being silenced and their strong emotions being shut down by adults, especially when bad things are happening to them, they learn the lie that they don’t have a right to establish boundaries to protect themselves. I remember a mother once talking to me about our local chiropractor. She gushed over him. She then said that her twelve-year-old daughter hated going and would act badly every time the mom took her. The words “I hate him” and “NO, I won’t go there” were screamed out, only to be shamed aside. A year later, it came out that that this chiropractor was molesting many of his patients, including her daughter. Another situation that shows how children learn to let the bad in was told to me by a grown woman. As a child, her uncle had been molesting her. She told her mom, and her mom said only that she would talk to him. The molestation stopped, but that uncle was still at every holiday dinner and family event, enjoying the family camaraderie while she felt sick and shamed at the sight of him.



To feel safe in an evil world, and to learn that they have a right to their personal boundaries, children need to be heard when they say:

"No."

"I don't want to."

"Stop that."

"Leave me alone."

"I don't like him."

"I won't."

"That hurts me."

"Don't touch me."

Obviously, we are not talking about children saying these things to their parent's requests to do chores. But when they are said to adults about other people in their lives, or if they are said directly to the adult who should be protecting them, and is instead hurting them, and they are not heard or listened to, children become handicapped as adults, unable to set protective boundaries or to say no to bad things. As children and as adults, they become compliant to any demands put on them. Often, they also do not speak up when another person is being harmed.



SAYING "NO" TO GOOD THINGS

Boundaries are like walls. In biblical times, walls weren't just for decoration. They meant the very survival of the city. But the walls had gates that let people in and out. Personal boundaries are protective walls around us, but they must have gates to let good things in as well as keep bad things out. Oftentimes people who cannot say no to others, including when that person brings them pain, cannot ask for help for themselves. They remain closed to the good things God has for them because they are so focused on what they have let in. This, undergirded by shame, keeps the bad things in place. When a woman is raised in a shaming family, the lens through which she sees herself is distorted. When unconditional love comes her way, she cannot let it in. There are many reasons for this, which are all connected to the issues we have discussed in previous chapters.

The Bible's message is predominantly about love—our need for it and God's gift of it. But even in Scripture, we find the concept of closed hearts. In 2 Corinthians 6:11–13, we read, "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also." When you learn to recognize the lies of shame and replace them with Truth, then you will be able to establish healthy boundaries, and your heart will be able to say "yes" to the good and "no" to the bad. It doesn't happen quickly, and it takes work, but with practice you can have healthy boundaries!

IS THIS IN MY YARD OR MY NEIGHBORS' YARD?

One of the best visuals on this topic is offered by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend in their book entitled *Boundaries*. They talk about how boundaries are like yards. Each house has a defined front yard. We may keep our yard trimmed with flowers in the beds and lovely shade trees. Our neighbor might not care so much, and his yard shows it. While the view of his overgrown yard may bother you, it is not up to you to go into his yard to mow and weed and plant. Likewise, he may enjoy looking at your lovely yard, but he can't throw his trash over the hedge into yours. If either of you did this, you would be in violation of your property boundaries. This doesn't mean a relationship cannot be fostered by you sharing tips on gardening and him sharing his problems with you. But for you to go and take care of his yard, no matter how unsightly it is, is taking on his problem. And for him to toss his garbage in your yard would be violating the law. The analogy here is simple. You may see things in others' lives that pain you and are hard to look at. You may offer assistance and encouragement. But ultimately, it is their problem, not yours, and they decide whether they are going to solve it. Their problem is in their yard, and your problems are in your yard.



As Christian women, we often confuse empowering with enabling. We are called to serve others and respond to the needs of others with compassion. When we don't have healthy boundaries, we become enmeshed in other's problems, taking them on as our own. Often, when this is the case, the unmet expectations of the giver and the receiver end up in conflict. I know this dilemma well. In my early years, I had compassion and a desire to help, but I sometimes lacked the proper boundaries. For six years, pregnant girls and troubled teens lived with us. In most instances, I had no problem setting boundaries, and many young women went through our home and launched into a successful life. Things went badly when I did not see the need for a boundary between someone I was helping and myself; I became her "best friend." Boundaries were crossed, and she became "part of the family." But she wasn't family, and the expectation I allowed led to her emotional dependence on me and then an explosive break in the friendship when my behavior did not match her expectations. When I met her, her needs were very real and pressing. But instead of helping her, I hurt her. Not intentionally, of course, but I set up unrealistic expectations, which ultimately, she could not live up to, nor could I. Because of the enmeshment, it ended badly. Fortunately, it was a hard but valuable lesson learned that has not repeated itself.

The same concept comes into play when we consistently give free things to people in need, thereby enabling them. I have ministered in Ethiopia, where my husband and I started a maternity home. Our home, which took in sixteen moms, was offered as a safe place for them in a time of crisis. In Ethiopia, the stigma of being pregnant out of wedlock, whether it is from rape, incest, or consensual sexual relations, results in being kicked out of your family, your village, or your job. They came with the clothes on their backs. They had no possessions and were often hungry and fearful. The compassionate thing to do was to give them a bed, food, and safety. That part was easy. The issue was, what would they do once those basic needs were met? While they were allowed to stay after they gave birth to their babies, they eventually needed to move out. And unless we provided more sustainable skills, they would be right back in the place where they began. They worked making jewelry, which we sold, and they made an income that they put into savings. They



also went to school for cooking, hairstyling, or sewing. But some of them simply did not want to put in the effort. One precious girl who came to us from the streets as a beggar left to return to begging. This is the harsh reality of helping people. They make their choices, and often it is not what is best for them. The other side of this is that their story is not yet finished. I have predicted failure for some of our girls, both in Ethiopia and here in the United States, only to be humbled by God as He continued the work and continued the growth in their lives.

LEARNING HOW TO SET BOUNDARIES

The first thing you must do is learn to recognize when your boundaries are being crossed or when you are crossing others'.

Take an honest stock of your life.

Do you always say yes even though you want to say no?

Do you not take the word "no" from others?

Do you feel uncomfortable asking for emotional support when you need it?

Do you return back to the same bad situation, hoping it will change?

Do you often tell others what they should do about their problems?

Do you feel guilty about having needs?

Do you feel unspiritual when you say no to helping with a church program or request?

Do you do things for people you care about but resent having to do it?

Do you resort to manipulation to get your way?

Do you get angry with people when they voice a differing opinion?

Do you rescue people (your children, your husband, or other people you are helping), keeping them from experiencing the consequences of their actions?

This isn't an exhaustive list, but if you answer honestly and come up with yes to any of them, then you need to work on boundaries.



After you become aware of your boundary issues, ask yourself what you fear if you are honest with yourself.

Hurting someone's feelings?

Someone getting angry at you?

Feeling shame?

Being abandoned?

Being unspiritual?

Being bad or selfish?

Being punished?

Being hurt?

Most manipulation among families happens within the “dance.” This was discussed in chapter 11. Can you recognize any dances in your family that have let you to agree to things you didn’t want to do or resent when you say yes? Do you go back over and over, hoping for a different response from a parent or sibling, only to face the same coldness, criticism, rejection, or confrontation?

When you recognize that there is a boundary issue in your life, ask yourself a simple question: Whose yard is this problem in? If you answer honestly, then let your actions follow that truth!



Overcome
Jeremy Camp

