

Study 9

Understanding Boundaries



“Having an awareness of boundaries and limits helps me discover who I am. Until I know who I am, it will be difficult for me to have healthy relationships, whether they may be casual acquaintances, friends, close relationships or intimate relationships.”

*It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both summer and winter.
~ Psalms 74:17*

What are Boundaries?

Simply stated, a boundary is a limit or edge. A fence marking a property line is a boundary. Walls, hedges, or signs also serve as physical boundaries as they mark property that belongs to a person. There are privileges and responsibilities that go with owning the property within a boundary. This is standard and accepted in society today.

There are also personal boundaries that differentiate people from one another. Skin is a boundary line; it defines where one physically begins and ends as a person. Personal boundaries also extend beyond the skin to the space around a person. One may physically back away from another when he or she feels the other person is too close and crowding their space. Healthy boundaries protect a person, keeping bad out and allowing good in.

Many people are not aware of how much these personal boundaries affect their lives. In addition to defining a person physically, boundaries define people emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. They define who a person is and also what does or does not belong to him or her. Feelings, attitudes, and reactions to events and people fall within a person's boundaries. Yet people tend to react to others based on their feelings and attitudes. They don't accept responsibility for their behavior and relationships are damaged.

Personal boundaries are not as acceptable in society as property boundaries. Most people are not taught about boundaries as children, and they are often taught experientially that their personal boundaries are not important. Relationships tend to be confusing, hurtful, dysfunctional, and difficult without defined healthy boundaries. Everyone *can* learn to implement healthy boundaries.

God and Boundaries

The concept of boundaries is not a man-made idea; it comes from God Himself. God differentiates Himself from angels and mankind. In the Bible, God defines Himself and takes ownership and responsibility for what is His. He tells others what He feels and thinks and lets His likes and dislikes be known. There are things God allows and things He does not allow.

God introduces boundaries to mankind in the Book of Genesis when He told Adam that he could eat of any tree, but not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said that if Adam ate of that tree he would die and when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they brought death into the world. God set the boundary; man violated the boundary and then endured the consequences.



Jesus demonstrated healthy boundaries during His walk on earth. He left the crowds to spend time alone with the Father (Luke 5:15-16). He addressed inappropriate behavior, always spoke the truth, and sought only to please God, not people. He was not deterred from His purpose when Peter attempted to dissuade Him from going to the cross (Mat. 16:21-23).

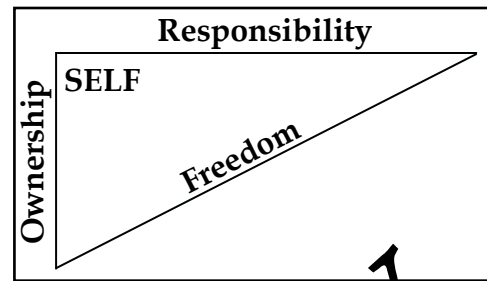
We see examples of God's boundaries throughout the Bible and also see that He does not violate man's boundaries. Jesus stands at the door of the heart and knocks, but He does not enter unless each person opens the door (Revelation 3:20). God does not force people to obey His commands; He allows them the choice. Adam and Eve made their own choices to disobey and eat the fruit. Every person has the choice to live life God's way or their own way.

Misconceptions About Boundaries

Most people, especially Christians, do not understand boundaries. Misconceptions range from the person who believes boundaries are not Scriptural to those who rigidly hold to overly restrictive boundaries that allow no flexibility in their life. Yes, Christians *are* to "die to self," pick up their cross and serve others, but we must remember that God does not say "yes" to every request. Jesus consistently demonstrated healthy boundaries, even as He proceeded toward the cross to die for the sinners of mankind. God holds mankind responsible for their sinful behavior and we also should hold others responsible for their poor behavior.

Healthy boundaries are not selfish or "un-Christian." They pertain to self and define who you are. Boundaries are not set *on* others. Appropriate boundaries do not hurt people, even though there are those who may claim injury. Boundaries are not necessarily permanent and may be loosened or changed at any time or in certain situations. They do not keep you from relationship, but help you build healthy relationships.

Ownership & Responsibility



Boundaries are about "self," meaning that we accept ownership for who we are and take responsibility for our behavior. The interesting fact of boundaries is that when we accept ownership and take responsibility, it brings freedom. Healthy boundaries allow us to be who we are and behave in ways that will build healthy relationships. We are freed to be ourselves and not take on the guilt or responsibility of others' actions.

Taking ownership means accepting those things pertaining to self (who you are):

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|----------------|--------------|
| ➤ Personality | ➤ Strengths |
| ➤ Past life | ➤ Weaknesses |
| ➤ Values | ➤ Needs |
| ➤ Feelings | ➤ Talents |
| ➤ Sexuality | ➤ Thoughts |
| ➤ Attitudes | ➤ Beliefs |
| ➤ Spirituality | ➤ Desires |

These things make up who you are as a person. Your personality is part of who you are as a person and will affect how you react or respond to people and situations you encounter, but you must behave responsibly and not react in hurtful ways. There are negative aspects to each personality type and allowing those negative areas to control your behavior is contrary to the principles of healthy boundaries. Likewise, it is essential that you take ownership of each area of your life; that who you are builds healthy relationships rather than tears them down.

You cannot always control what happens in your life, but you can choose how you respond to the circumstances you experience. Past pain and hurt do not have to negatively affect present behavior. When you take ownership, you do not



justify sinful or poor behavior by blaming others, your personality, or past wrongs done to you.

Areas in which everyone must take responsibility are:

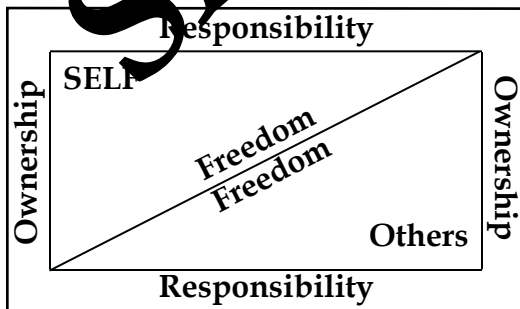
- Actions ➤ Mistakes
- Behaviors ➤ Words
- Choices ➤ Love

Accepting responsibility for the things we do helps us live healthier lives. We must proactively take charge of what we say and do; it is a choice we make. Even making the choice to love our spouse and others. When we accept responsibility and not blame others, we will grow as a person and in our relationships.

No one has the right to wrong, not even if wrong has been done to them.

Throughout history people have blamed others for problems that belong within their own boundaries. This is seen in the account of the fall. God confronted Adam, and he blamed the woman God had given him. Then, Eve blamed the serpent. People must stop blaming others for their problems, sin, and failures and take ownership for who they are and responsibility for their behavior. Yes, there may be times when someone may violate your boundaries. You cannot change the wrong done, but you are responsible for how you proceed from that point. A person is not responsible for abuse he or she may have received, but they must take responsibility for their behavior and not blame present poor behavior on the evil done to them in the past.

Boundaries Occur in Relationship



Boundaries do not occur in a vacuum, they occur in relationship. Not only do we have to accept ownership for what is ours and take respon-

sibility for what we do, we also must give others ownership and responsibility for what is within their boundaries. Healthy boundaries will help others acknowledge what is theirs, and hopefully, accept those things and make the appropriate changes to effectively handle difficulties.

When others are not held accountable or responsible for what they do, they do not grow. Continually rescuing others and not allowing them to suffer the consequences of their actions is unhealthy and they learn to be dependent on you, instead of God. People grow and mature when they must take responsibility for their behaviors. When both people take ownership for who they are and accept responsibility for what they do, the relationship becomes stronger and healthier.

*A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.
~ Proverbs 19:19*

Boundaries Bring Freedom!

Healthy boundaries free you to be the person God intended you to be. Relationships occur at the point where people have contact with other people, at their boundaries. Without an understanding and respect of boundaries, people will find relationships difficult and often unhealthy. Established healthy boundaries give people the freedom to behave in positive, relationship building ways.

The purpose of boundaries is to take ownership and responsibility for self, not to change others. There is great freedom in knowing that it is not your responsibility to change others or make them do what is right. Living in openness, transparency, and accountability is what God intended for our lives – it is freedom!

Protecting Yourself

Protective boundaries guard a person, keeping the evil out and allowing the good in. Again, boundaries are about self, not others. People often

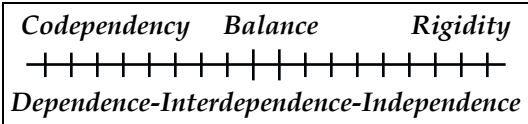
*A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it.
~ Proverbs 22:3*



say yes to what they know is unhealthy, hurtful, or not beneficial for them. Or they say no to what is helpful or good for them. The person with healthy boundaries has the ability to say yes or no appropriately to avoid unhealthy situations and protect themselves.

Finding the Balance

Another way to look at boundaries is to view boundaries as a scale from unhealthy codependency to unhealthy rigidity. The balance—interdependence—is in the middle of the scale.



Many people tend toward codependency, allowing others to control their lives or being dependent on others for one's significance or identity. Others tend toward rigidity, an independence, inflexibility, or not allowing others into their lives.

The balance is interdependence—a connection with others without dependence on or control by others. There is tremendous freedom in this balance—freedom to love who you were created to be and freedom to grow in relationships.

The foundation of boundaries is love. Love for God, self, and others should be the motivation for setting boundaries. Boundaries are not to be used to manipulate, control, or to get one's own way. Healthy boundaries allows us to live in relationships that are loving and authentic. With healthy boundaries, people discover the freedom to love others as God created them and respect their differences. Relationships become healthier, productive, and rewarding.

For Discussion as a Couple



1. Do you agree that personal boundaries are not as acceptable as property boundaries in society? What are your thoughts?

2. How does the fact that God sets boundaries affect your life?

3. Why do you think Christians are especially susceptible to confusion about boundaries?

4. How can accepting ownership and taking responsibility for what is yours affect your marriage?

5. How do you find the balance for healthy boundaries?

SAMPLE STUDY



Boundary Setting Inventory

Think about your relationships with family, friends and co-workers. Circle "YES" or "NO" for each of the following questions as they apply generally to those relationships. Please answer honestly and with some thought. Your relationships can improve if you will look honestly at how well you set boundaries in your life.

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|--|---|
| 1. Do you find it difficult to say "no" to people, even when you want to? YES NO | 11. Do you have problems being honest with those you are close to? YES NO |
| 2. Do you tend to have relationships with people who hurt you? YES NO | 12. Do you find it hard to confront others? YES NO |
| 3. Do you feel that your success depends on others? YES NO | 13. Do you find that your conflicts are not usually resolved productively? YES NO |
| 4. Do you find yourself attempting to find ways to fix the situation when someone is upset? YES NO | 14. Do you have trouble asking for what you want or need? YES NO |
| 5. Do you lie for others to cover for their mistakes or irresponsibility? YES NO | 15. Do you tend to lend money and not get it back? YES NO |
| 6. Do you tend to look at others' potential and overlook their consistently irresponsible behavior? YES NO | 16. Do you trust people only to have them take advantage of you? YES NO |
| 7. Do you try to fix other people? YES NO | 17. Do you tend to be in the middle of problems between other people? YES NO |
| 8. Do you take care of the hurts of others while neglecting your own? YES NO | 18. Do you generally put more into relationships than you get out of them? YES NO |
| 9. Do you find yourself taking responsibility for others' lives? YES NO | 19. Do you have trouble following through with your commitments? YES NO |
| 10. Do you find that you are manipulated or controlled by others? YES NO | 20. Do you have trouble saying "no" to the bad habits in your own life? YES NO |

Most people have some boundary problems in their life. No "YES" answers may mean overly rigid or strict boundaries in your life. A number of "YES" (more than six or eight) answers indicate a problem setting boundaries. Many "YES" answers indicate that you have not grown up with an awareness of boundaries. This is not a test; it is an inventory you can use to help you understand boundaries and identify possible boundaries issues. It is never too late to begin setting boundaries in your life. It may not always be easy, but the effort is worthwhile.

SAMPLE STUDY



Defining Boundaries – Who am I?

Utilize the questions below to summarize what you have discovered in Chapters 1 & 2 about who you are. This defines who you are as a person.

1. State who you are in one sentence: _____

2. How has your family of origin affected your life? _____

3. What is your personality type? What are some of your strengths and weaknesses? _____

4. Are you an extrovert or introvert? Explain: _____

5. What are your two top Spiritual Gifts? How do they affect you? _____

6. What is your purpose in life? _____

7. What are your values? What is most important to you? _____

8. What is your vision for your life? _____

9. What are 2 or 3 of your talents and abilities? _____

Discuss the answers to these questions with your spouse.

