

The Simple Scoop on Boundaries

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When we wrote *Boundaries* in 1992, we had no idea what would happen with the book. We were just responding to a need that we perceived in the people we worked with. We had no idea how deeply felt that need actually was. As I was reflecting on what to say in a short article about the essence of boundaries, I returned to that need that we felt 5 years ago. Simply stated, it is this: people have a need to be in control of their own lives, and they have a need to know that God is behind that idea.

This need is fundamental in the creation of mankind, according to the Bible. God created us to be free, and to act responsibly with our freedom. He wanted us to be in control of ourselves, and to have a good existence. He was behind that idea all along. But as we all know, we misused our freedom and as a result, lost it. And the big fruit of this loss of freedom was the loss of self-control. We have felt the results of that ever since in a wide variety of misery. Consider a few of the alternatives to self-control:

- Controlling relationships where people try to control each other
- Faith that is practiced out of guilt and drudgery instead of freedom and love
- The replacement of love as a motivator with guilt, anger and fear instead
- The inability to stop evil in significant relationships and cultures
- The inability to gain control of our own behavior and solve problems in our lives
- The loss of control to addictive processes
- The generational cycle of sin unable to be broken

These are to name a few. So, it is now no wonder why the need for *Boundaries* was felt so deeply. It talked about something so dear to the heart of God that He says it was one of the motivators for the sacrifice of Christ Himself: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1) Jesus died to set us free: from sin, from the devil, from the world around us. And that is the essence of what *Boundaries* teach—freedom. So, with that in mind, let's look at some of the aspects of freedom that are important.

Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. As it was in the garden of Eden, God's created order was that we were to be free moral agents, and to operate within the boundaries that He established for us. We wanted to use our freedom in any way that we chose, and as a result, we lost it. Now, God has returned us to freedom, and like in the beginning, we are to use it responsibly, or we become slaves all over again.

So, with the freedom that Christ has given you, you have to be responsible for your life and existence. This means that in all areas of your life, you are accountable. Here are some of the areas that we think the Bible talks about:

- Feelings
- Attitudes
- Behaviors
- Choices
- Limits
- Talents
- Thoughts

- Desires
- Loves
- Values

All of these things lie within the property of your own soul, within your boundaries. And God has given you stewardship over that domain. But, He will also hold you responsible in the end. As Paul and Jesus both tell us, “So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” (Romans 14:12) On that day, there will be no blaming it on someone else, no excuses given such as “he made me feel that way,” or “she drove me to it.” It will be just us and Him, and we will be responsible. So, while freedom is a good thing, it has another side to it that is weighty indeed.

Ownership

Ownership is the next aspect of Boundaries. What ownership basically is about is the possession of what God has entrusted to us. Ownership says, “that is mine, and I am responsible for it.” It is what Jesus was calling us to in the commandment to “take the log out of our own eye first.” (Lk. 6:42) So, in order to take responsibility for our lives, we must own what is ours. The list above of feelings, attitudes and the like is the place to look for what we need to take ownership of. If I am angry, for example, then it is my anger and I have to take responsibility for it, not blame it on you. You may have provoked me to it, but the reality is that since it exists in my soul, it is my problem. The behavior is your problem, what I feel and do in response is mine.

The same rule applies to the rest of the list. In order to gain control of our feelings, behaviors, choices and the like, we must first realize that they are ours and no one else’s. They reside in our own souls, so the ownership implies the responsibility.

This is the fuel that gets many people out of life-long victimization. They have an abusive “other” in their lives, and feel miserable most of the time. They feel victimized and powerless to do anything because the other person won’t change. They feel that as long as the other is drinking, or controlling, or mean, that they will feel depressed. But Boundaries teach us that since the feeling is on my property, I have to own it, and once I own it, I can do something about it. But as long as we give that control over to others of our property, then we will be victims of their irresponsibility. Ownership is the beginning of the steps to freedom. It is essentially the same as confession, “to agree with what is true.” All resolution of problems begins with confession.

Control

Ownership then leads to control. If you own a property, then you control it. It is under your domain. No one else, for example, can tell you what wallpaper to hang in your house, if you own it. You control that decision. It is the same for the elements listed above in your own soul. You control, or need to gain control of that entire list: feelings, attitudes, etc. That is what essentially fulfills freedom: regaining control.

This is the big payoff for freedom, and the reason that Boundaries was such good news to people. God is behind the idea of your being in control of your own life! He does not want anyone else controlling you, your feelings, your attitudes, your thoughts, or any other aspect of your life. He wants you in control of yourself so that you can freely submit that life to Him. As a result, you get the life that is in Him, and that is the best life possible. Self-control is the fruit of realizing the freedom that boundaries delineate. As

Paul says in Galatians, “self-control” is one of the fruits of the Spirit of God. (Gal. 5:22,23) And, as he says in the end of verse 23, “against such things there is no law.” So, whoever has told you that your life is not under your control must not have read this passage. If someone is trying to manipulate you, or in the Bible’s words—enslave you, through guilt, anger, fear, or the like, then they are out of bounds. They are crossing the boundary that God has established, and crossing a boundary in the Bible’s words is called trespassing. But, and here is the kicker to it all, if you are letting them control you, then you are responsible for that and are trespassing in that way as well. That is the freedom and the responsibility of boundaries. God has given you freedom, and commanded you to take control of the things that He has entrusted to you. Remember what we learned from Galatians 5:1? “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” You are the one who must take control of the aspects of your life that we described above and exercise the freedom and responsibility that God has given you. And remember, where He has given you control, He will hold you accountable. That is why there will ultimately be no excuse before Him. Just as He called Joshua to go and possess the land that He had secured for Israel, He calls you to go and possess the freedom for which Christ has secured for you. And taking control of your life is one of the ways that you begin to realize the freedom that He has for you.

Limiting Evil

One of the other aspects of boundaries that is important is the limiting effect upon evil. Remember, because God does not control people, they are, in a certain way, free to be evil. He does not make them be good. He limits His sovereignty and control in some ways that we do not totally understand. But, even though He allows them to be evil, He limits the effects of their choices. He exercises limits on the effect that their choices will have on Him, His church, the world, etc.

He has also given us this duty, to limit the effect that evil choices that people make can have on life. One of the best examples of that is in Matthew 18:15-18. It is the role of us to take a stand and “bind” evil as it presents itself. Read Psalms 101 for a great description of how David thought about the things that must be bound so that the evil of others would not “cling” to him.

In addition, He wants us to limit the effect that the evil is having on their life as well. He wants us to restore those who get “caught up,” by evil. We are to put boundaries on the cancer that is destroying them and be redemptive in their lives. (Gal. 6:1)

God is about Life. He is about restoring good things. And to do that, evil things must be held in check and transformed. He has given us many tools to perform this function of the salt that seasons the earth:

- Truth and Commands
- Confrontation
- Rebuke
- Exhortation
- Forgiveness
- Group Intervention
- Consequences
- Discipline

- Restoration
- Limit Setting
- Separation

These are some of the processes that God has told us to do that limit and restore evil. And, they work. The problem is that we do not exercise our control and responsibility to do these things in our significant relationships, the church, and the world at large. As has been the story since the garden of Eden, the mess is largely of our own making. If we would use our self-control to do these things, then we would not have the messes in various aspects of life in which we find ourselves. We have misused our freedom. But, the good news of boundaries is that you can take control back in your own areas of influence, and begin to limit evil and restore life.

Love

Finally, it is all about love. As Jesus has told us, the two greatest commandments hang on the ultimate reality of Love. And this is the biggest misunderstanding that we find when talking about Boundaries. Many people think that boundaries are about selfishness and are at their root, self-serving. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Boundaries are about freedom, and freedom is always meant to have as it's ultimate fruit, love. As Paul says, and we would echo to anyone who uses boundaries in a self-serving way,

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature ; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5:13,14)

Boundaries are about God's restoring freedom to you and me so that we could take control of our lives to be able to love Him and others. Ultimately, that is the fruit of boundaries, to love our of freedom, and with purpose.

A Fruit

One final note. All of the above talks about taking control of your life. The elements that we listed above, like feelings, attitudes, choices, etc. must come under your control in order for life to work. But what if you can't take control of them? What if you are "unable?"

That is the good news of the gospel, that Jesus takes captives and turns them into free people. Remember, the ability to make good choices is a fruit of spiritual growth. (Gal. 5:23) If you are not able to do that now, God will help you. He will work in your life through a process of spiritual growth, and the end result will be more freedom and more self-control. Submit to His process and allow Him to do that.