

Boundaries

Part One: The Function of Boundaries

The concept

We know about boundaries on maps: they mark ownership, where one person's space begins and another ends. We know that 'good fences make good neighbours,' and the same is true in relationships.

A personal boundary is where I end and you begin. Like a fence around a property, it marks the point at which I am responsible: for deciding who comes and goes, and for what is allowed to happen within that space.

Physically, our most obvious boundary is our skin. For some, this boundary was breached early in childhood – through physical and/or sexual abuse – which can often result in difficulty in managing boundaries in adult life.

The concept of boundaries as used here includes the physical but goes beyond it to encompass everything for which I am answerable to God – whether I have chosen them or not. It includes, for example, my time, gifts, abilities, likes, dislikes and feelings; also my resources, beliefs, choices and my part of relationships; above all, it includes my heart (Proverbs 4:23). These are the areas where most boundary conflicts occur.

The nature of a boundary

In order for a boundary to be effective it must:

- **Be visible.** People must know where it is, which is one reason why we talk about your boundary being like a fence. Healthy people have no problem expressing their likes and dislikes. If you don't make your wishes and opinions known (for example, if you have been taught you must please others, or must not 'rock the boat') then other people will not know how to behave towards you in a healthy and appropriate way.
- **Act as a barrier.** This is the primary function of the boundary: it must keep in the good; and it must keep out the bad, unknown or untrusted. For it to function well, you have to believe that this barrier is good and right.
- **Have an effective gate.** It must allow the good to enter and leave, and it must prevent the bad from entering and the good from being stolen.
- **Carry a recognised sanction for trespass.** You cannot make other people behave appropriately, but you can ensure they know the price of not doing so. The other person has a choice whether to respect or ignore the boundary, so they must know the consequences of their choice.
- **Carry an implemented sanction for trespass.** If the sanction for trespass is not implemented or not implemented consistently, people will learn that they can ignore it and will ignore the boundary.

If the boundary is ineffective and not respected, there are two main consequences: firstly, you have to suffer the consequences of other people abusing you and the things that are yours; and secondly, you have to put in a great deal of effort when you really do want someone to respect your territory; these two consequences often result in anger and nagging – “How many times do I have to tell you ... ?”

The choice

Where you set your boundaries is, to a certain extent, your choice; whether you consistently enforce your boundaries is entirely up to you. And, in the long run, you only have three basic options to choose between.

- **You can aim to please everyone else** (being who they want you to be).
- **You can aim to please yourself** (being whoever you want to be, whatever the cost to the people around you).
- **Or you can aim to please God** (being true to who He has created you to be).

But you can't build strong, stable relationships if you are switching between these options, and **you can't please everyone all of the time.**

Boundary Areas

Relationships

A boundary fence contains some kind of access gate, allowing others entry and exit. Internally we need a similar fence with an entry and exit point for others in relationship with us.

Here are some common problems with these internal fences and gates.

- **Non-existent.** We don't differentiate between friend and foe; anyone can have access to all of us.
- **Impenetrable.** No-one gets in under any circumstances.
- **Mistaken.** There is a fortified fence and defended gate, but they are in the wrong place, so the wrong people are allowed in. It is common for people to be too suspicious, and let too few people in; but once they are let in, they are trusted too much (because trusting no-one feels too lonely) so they are allowed to cause as much damage as they could do if the boundary is non-existent.

A healthy boundary is multi-layered. Some people are distrusted and kept at a distance; others trusted, but only up to a point; and a few are allowed into the 'inner sanctum'. Within the private area, some people will be allowed into some parts, and some into others.

Taking the analogy of a property: it has a fence around the outside with a gate leading into the garden; inside the garden is a house with a locked front door; and inside the house are some areas (the living room and kitchen) where visitors are welcome and some areas (the study and bedroom) where they only enter if they are specifically invited.

A person with healthy boundaries will feel comfortable to honestly give or refuse access at any of these points when responding to an invitation, and will carefully consider a request (a knock at the door) asking for a new level of trust.

Responsibility

In my garden I would expect to be the one who digs, weeds, sows and reaps. I would not expect my neighbour to do it or for my neighbour to expect me to tend his or her garden, except by mutual agreement.

When I use the skills, calling and gifts God has given me each day, I will grow the garden He intends, balancing the 24 hours each day He has given me between Him, Others and Self as He intended (Mark 12:30-31).

When I allow others to demand of me that I take care of their garden:

- my own will be neglected;
- they may continue to plant weeds for me to pull out;
- they may benefit from my cultivation without any personal effort or cost; and
- they will never 'count the cost' or take responsibility for their own garden.

Galatians 6:5 says we should carry our own load (the Greek means 'a little burden') and Galatians 6:2 tells us to carry each others' burdens (the Greek means 'a load too heavy for one person to bear'). My load is my responsibility, and I will not grow as I need to if I do not carry it.

If we burden ourselves with others' loads we have overstepped the boundary of care, and this is often because we are not distinguishing between load and burden. We should help other people to carry their burden, whilst giving them the responsibility (along with the blessing that goes with it) to shoulder their own load.

Confidentiality is one key area where we need to take responsibility, correctly handling personal or private information provided by other people, not telling others unless we know the person wants us to do so.

Authority

I should hold the keys to my property (to my gate and house), as should others hold the keys to theirs, except by mutual agreement in recognition of another's burden. If I have allowed another to use my keys without permission, I have given up ownership and endowed them with authority; given them power in my life. This can result in:

- bowing to their commands or demands;
- allowing them to dictate my status and worth;
- allowing them to determine how I should feel; and
- being their slave (remember the difference between a slave and a servant).

Ultimately I am responsible (answerable to God) for remaining the 'Key Holder' of my life and in all my relationships.

God's Boundaries

Relationships

- God loves everyone (wants the best for everyone) and wants everyone to have a close friendship with Him, but some people do not want to live as His friend.
- God has laid down extensive guidelines as to how this friendship is to be conducted, with clearly identified consequences of ignoring His guidelines.
- Jesus had friends at several levels, and enemies too.

If we are to follow the Father's and Son's example we should be prepared to set similar criteria in our relationships. When we remove relationship privileges from others who have abused them (crossed the boundaries), we do not reject them, but we do reject their dysfunctional behaviour. By so doing we can encourage them to seek the truth of God's love for them in how they conduct all their relationships.

God's guidelines are not arbitrary rules, set with the intention of limiting our freedom and punishing us if we break them: they are provided by a loving God Who knows how we are made and understands what is in our best interests, given to help us live the best possible life we can have. But people can interpret these guidelines in harsh, insensitive and in appropriate ways, so be careful when people claim to know God's will and lay down simplistic rules concerning how we should live.

Responsibility

- God claims full rights to what is His (Isaiah 45:22; Matt 20:15).
- God delegates responsibility (Genesis 1) and once delegated, unless we request His help, He doesn't interfere – however badly we do the delegated task or role.
- God allows us to choose how we use the resources he has gifted to us – to build or to destroy.
- Jesus knew the purpose of His life and to Whom He was ultimately responsible (John 17:4).
- Jesus came as a servant, but not a slave – He did not always respond to others' expectations and demands of him (Matthew 14:23).

Authority

- God is true to himself even when others don't agree with Him.
- He respects the authority, autonomy and choice He has given us over our own lives (Mark 10:21-23).
- Even on the cross Jesus was able to state that no-one was taking His life – He was giving it up in accordance with the Father's will.
- Because of God's good boundaries in relationships, when He says "Yes" or "No" He means it; because He respects our "Yes" and "No", we can trust His love for us is true – it is not manipulative, compulsive, conditional or based on guilt (Matthew 5:37).

Boundary Errors

There are four basic categories of error which people fall into in terms of personal boundaries. While they sometimes overlap, the boundary errors fall mainly into one of these categories, which produces four distinct types of people.

Those who can't say "No":

- are people with low self esteem and are often co-dependent;
- feel obliged to do whatever is asked of them, even at great personal cost;
- often carry deep fears of abandonment and worthlessness;
- are compliant, afraid to hurt others and people-pleasers; and
- believe others' wants and needs must always take priority over their own.
(Note the inconsistency in this belief: if it is important that perceived need is met, why is it not important that my need is met?)

Those who can't hear "No":

- Are, in essence, controllers: 'the Bulldozer' (driving straight through others' boundaries) or 'the Mole' (ignoring the boundary above ground);
- are raised to believe someone else will always 'do' (pay the cost) for them;
- are not happy as others quickly learn not to spend time with them by choice;
- live without forethought of the consequences or effect on others; and
- often team up with those who can't say "No".

Those who can't say "Yes":

- are avoidant;
- have very high boundaries;
- are intensely aware of (maybe even disturbed by) their own neediness;
- are often incapable of caring for or helping anyone else;
- have often denied their own desire to the extent they can only feel disturbed wariness of others' needs; and
- often express strong opinions about those they see as unnecessarily needy – 'parasites on society'.

Those who can't hear "Yes":

- are self-sufficient and dislike being dependent;
- believe their value lies in helping others, not being helped;
- can't bear to ask for help from others;
- if offered help, refuse it or accept it under duress as it diminishes their 'helping others' ethos and sense of self-worth; and
- are often the same people that can't say "No".

Boundary Issues

Developing boundaries

- Children are not born with a knowledge of boundaries (other than the physical restriction of the womb). They have a belief that they and their mother are one being (because that is their experience).
- Awareness of being a separate ‘Self’ leads to awareness of personal preferences and goals. Within the realms of safety, a child should be given space to explore his or her inner feelings and individual choices.
- For this to happen effectively the child needs to know it is loved and will not be rejected for being his or her self.
- Parents must be able to exercise a firm “Yes” and “No”, with a clear explanation of the reasons and consequences of both.

Essential tools to enable boundary development

In developing good boundaries a child needs to use three tools.

- **Anger.** This is a monitoring device which enables us to recognise and communicate that there is a problem between myself and another.
- **Ownership.** “I”, “me”, “my”, “mine” and “myself” are building blocks to stewardship, knowledge and self-control. They are good: like all good things, they can be misused, but they are not necessarily expressions of a sinful nature and selfishness. Jesus referred to Himself and stated who “I am” frequently.
- **“No”.** This expresses and represents the power of choice. Parents need wisdom in knowing when to give the emerging ‘Self’ the choices where a “No” can be accepted.

Dealing with poor boundaries

- Give yourself an honest ‘boundary check up’ and identify the areas that cause you difficulties; try to understand how they arose.
- Find someone you trust to talk through your strengths and weaknesses in this area: it is hard to objectively assess ourselves, so honest feedback is essential.
- Identify if there is a particular relationship (or more than one), historical or current, you need to deal with.
- Practice good boundary skills with those you can trust: start with small steps, consciously deciding to receive ‘good’ from others and reject ‘bad’.
- Forgiveness is a God given boundary: forgive those who have trespassed – and, if necessary, avoid those who continue to do so until you feel strong enough to resist their assault on your property.
- Be pro-active (initiating and responsive), rather than reactive, so that you remain in control and in charge of what is yours.
- Love the Other from free choice and healthy responsibility (response-ability), using God-given abilities in deciding an appropriate response (2 Cor. 9:7).

The value of good boundaries

- Freedom to live the life God has given us (Hebrews 12:1).
- Avoid the anger engendered by feeling used by others – having no choice and used against our will.
- Able to freely say both “Yes” and “No” as an expression of what we desire and choose.
- Our most precious offerings are gifted to those most appreciative of them – those we allow into deep intimate friendship with us (Matthew 7:6).
- Our friendship circle widens and deepens as we are able to appropriately lower our boundaries.
- We are able to monitor the behaviour of those we trust: trusting people does not mean we abdicate responsibility.
- We do not feel guilty when other peoples’ gardens lie untended.

Part Two: Setting Boundaries

When seeking to help vulnerable people, all the principles described above continue to apply. It is even more important that you are aware of and apply them, because the people you work with are vulnerable, and any mistake on your part could result in more serious harm to both of you.

Vulnerable people may be both more needy and more manipulative than you are used to. You deal with needy and manipulative people every day (even if you are too polite to label them as such), but you may not be used to dealing with people who are as needy (and willing to admit their need), or with people who deliberately aim to manipulate others.

Imposing boundaries

In normal life, you negotiate changes to boundaries with other people. One person takes a small step, then the other person does. You discover if you like and trust the other person by opening up and sharing a few things, and seeing how they respond.

But, in this context, the other person may be wanting a deep relationship with you right now. This is partly genuine (they do need friends) and partly cynical manipulation (they can get you to help them more if you feel a strong bond). So the usual process of negotiating may not work here: you have to be responsible for setting the boundaries in the right place, even if it is not where the other person wants them.

Working as part of a team

The other key difference is that you are used to negotiating boundaries with other people as something you do without any real reliance on anyone else. But in this context, you may find yourself being drawn ever closer to the other person. At the emotional level, you want to help, and intellectually you can justify each step.

The only answer to this is to work as part of a team, a supportive community. Mutual accountability must be the standard. You do not, in general, need to share personal details about the other person, but you do need to share how the boundaries are developing and get an objective and trustworthy response. You also need to be able to receive feedback from others on the team: if you find you do not want to tell people where you are and what you intend to do, you already have a problem.

A distinct role

In this role, you are expected to care for the other person, not just do things for them. You are expected to have a real relationship, involving trust. This must be a two-way thing. But you are still doing it as a job and as part of a team. There are no simple rules to tell you what is appropriate or not. There is no clear line between you as a person and what you do as part of your job – which is another reason why you will need the support of the group to help you understand what is helpful and appropriate at each stage.

So your relationships must be real but not exclusive, personal but not private. If you are not available, someone else from the team must be able to step in: if you are not replaceable, something is wrong.

Changing roles

The other complexity lies in the fact that the relationships change with time. The people being supported can become volunteers; and volunteers will sometimes need support themselves.

In a normal relationship, things change gradually; and these changes are mostly unspoken and unexamined. We do not have the same luxury here. We need clear categories, with different boundaries and expectations for each; we need explicit transitions between the categories; and we need to recognise that everyone will demonstrate human weakness, fail and let us down from time to time, so none of us are expected to be perfect, whatever our current role.

Two Perspectives

At the personal level, I need boundaries to flourish, to live in a happy, healthy and productive way, by recognising what is my responsibility, and what is not, and by recognising the legitimate but limited responsibility of other people.

Within an organisation, we need boundaries to function well, to ensure that the right rules are in place and are enforced, that relationships are professional, not personal, and that policies are implemented consistently, without individual biases and preferences getting in the way.

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