

UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are fences of protection that state our right to be honored and respected, and our willingness to honor and respect others. They state that “I belong to me” and “you belong to you.” They establish guidelines for what we allow and what we keep out in a relationship. Healthy boundaries validate others without compromising our core values. They also allow us to interact as individual people, rather than be hidden in the needs of those around us. Thus, healthy boundaries help us maintain a sense of our identity and uniqueness (“We are different people with different needs, and that’s okay. Both of us matter”).

Not only do boundaries define where one person ends and other begins, they also regulate the levels of access people have to our hearts. The deeper and more intimate the relationship, the more access that person is granted internally. Boundaries are not intended to block people or be a mechanisms of protection alone. Rather, they are meant to be used to establish guidelines that allows people to interact in safety and security.

How Boundaries Break Down

In relationships, boundaries can break down in many ways. When either person in a relationship has no sense of preciousness and worth, they can have an unhealthy open boundary system. Rather than say “no” and designate fences, they can welcome and allow unhealthy behaviors, emotions and interactions with other people. People that lack personal boundaries believe they have no rights, and they oftentimes allow people to use them and violate them. As they sit in a “house” without protection, they are constantly bombarded with offenses, and can easily enter into the mode of being a victim, filled with resentment and bitterness. They feel helpless, powerless and overcome by other people’s bad choices. They resolve to try to change and fix other people as a method of recovering their own sense of worth, only to be defeated over and over again.

Other people overly state boundaries and thus maintain closed boundaries. They are like a island protected by gigantic and thick fortified walls. They have so many guards in place, that a person couldn’t get access to their inner life at any cost. People that bind themselves through a walled lifestyle oftentimes vacillate towards addictive mentalities and form false and dangerous intimacy with drugs, alcohol, sex, work, food and other mindsets. They oftentimes have been very hurt or even traumatized at some point in their lives. They can be disconnected, angry and seemingly unloving, but usually they are fear-based and hurting. Since they were created for intimacy, the lack of human connection will drive shame and detachment, and they will never find fulfillment or satisfaction.

What is a Healthy Boundary?

To begin to form healthy boundaries in relationships, we will first need to define our own style. Both styles of boundaries (open and closed) are a form of survival of trying to have needs met. People living in self protection and survival are fear-based, and actually by default lack the driving life source of love. Therefore, the greatest remedy and resource is to have their inner “well” filled with the power of God’s love.

Defining Boundaries Positionally

Before understanding where and how boundaries break down, it’s imperative to understand our original God-created design. Like a watering garden, our hearts are meant to house a gigantic ocean filled with the well-spring of God’s Spirit. This hole is enormous and it is the source of life and love for all other relationships. If this well is dry, we will by default try to put a person there. This is Biblically known as idolatry. Placing a person or thing in God’s place will result in destruction and chaos. It will set the course of all other forms of relationship breakdowns. Trying to fix boundaries and relationship issues without being committed to understand the condition of our own “God well” is equivalent to building a dam and adjoining streams without any water source available. We have the infrastructure in place to experience the love and fulfillment as God designed, but we lack the primary resource to fill it all up – love.

Once we understand that God is intended to be designed as the Source, we can begin to put human relationship in their proper perspective. Intimacy in relationships refers to the level of intimacy, truth bearing, and interaction we give in each relationship. A complete stranger has utterly different access points than a spouse or a close friend. When relationships intended for intimacy, such as marriage, lack intimacy, they will drive a deep, unquenchable void internally. That’s because we were designed to house intimacy styles with parents, siblings, friends, spouses, etc. When those aren’t met we will feel detachment and loneliness. However, that emptiness cannot be misplaced with the primary need to be connected to the source of God’s love.

Two people designed for intimacy must not only have God’s love, but an interest in exposing the truths of their realities. Not only stating that, but being willing to listen and validate the truth of someone else’s realities. Anytimes a relationship enters into falsified intimacy where outward and inward truths don’t align, the relationship is no longer considered intimate but disconnected.

Boundaries are also intended to act as a mechanism to establish priorities. Husbands, wives and children, for example, have a more significant priority than co-workers, friends and other outside activities. Without healthy boundaries, the wrong priorities can cause us to devote our time and energy to places in our heart not intended for connection, while depriving relationships that were intended by God to house deep intimacy. (Read Chapters 5-8 in *A House that Grace Built* for more information). This will lead to much breakdown and turmoil .

The role of violation

Relationships created for intimacy lack substance when two people don’t trust each and are incapable of being love based. The lack of trust occurs through violations and the inability of having needs met by the other person. When one person hurts and

harms the other, the normal reaction to that situation is “that hurt, I’m not okay with that, please don’t do that again.” In a healthy relationship, it would allow for confession and forgiveness. But when chronic disrespect, violation and hurt are operating in a relationship without any confession or forgiveness, the relationship can become a warzone, with two people self protecting and committing intentional ways to cause harm. This is exactly the opposite of its intended design where love is meant to operate and establish the basic goal of honor and love. Violation can happen so often and so much it becomes part of the overall operating system.

Boundaries in Active Violation

When two people are in a relationship that lacks respect and is filled with violation, there are two basic needs on the line.

1. The relationship is bringing harm to the receiver and therefore by virtue of the basic right of worth and value, boundaries can be set and established that set guidelines and consequences for bad behavior.
2. The violator needs intervention, and true love doesn’t simply seek to self protection, but to offer a supportive when and if possible.

It is critical to engage in both areas in order to establish an agenda of love and redemption. When violation is ignored and consequences aren’t established, the cycle of enabling erupts and actually helps encourage bad behavior rather than come against it. On the other hands, when only consequences and punishment are use to come against violation, there is not mechanism to allow for healing, transformation and reconnection.

How to Define Boundaries

Boundaries first require our honestly with our own behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and mindsets before defining other people’s, lest we fall into the trap of hypocrisy. Matthew 7:5 says “Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.” This is our priority above any other as we are by nature prone to diminish our wrongdoing and exaggerate another’s.

In addition, it is also helpful that we establish our own intimacy styles and learn how and why we place people where we do. Learning the nature of our intimacy “map” in our own heart provides a much needed revelation of what is happening internally. If you have an addiction problem, you may ask “what does this have to do with it.” In truth, all addiction problems are the direct result of getting intimacy wrongly met through substance or behavior. Thus, no matter what you are struggling with, this picture holds a dramatic place in unlocking the key to our freedom.

Mapping Intimacy

It’s hard to get in touch with our inner lives. It’s mysterious what that actually looks like. When and if possible, it’s helpful to map out a visual of what that might loo like. To do this, we recommend you get a piece of blank paper and a pen, and draw the following:

1. Draw a huge circle that represents your entire “property”. Now describe next to that line what that boundary looks like. Is it a cement wall, a tiny fence, a big fence, no fence, etc.
2. Draw a smaller circle in the inward part of that larger that represents the “ocean” with the wellspring for the Holy Spirit to fill us. This spot is infinitely deep and channels all other “love” resources

into our lives. Ask yourself, is it full? It is empty? Who is in that spot if God isn’t? Is it being filled? If you know you are detached or have an idol in your life (addiction, person, etc.), no other boundary work can be accomplished until that is first dealt with. Do you want to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Ask Him! (Ephesians 5:18)

3. One you the God ocean filled, begin to draw the places where other people life. If they are intimate (close) relationships, draw them close to the God ocean. If they are distant relationships, draw them close to the outside line. If they are so distant, draw them outside of your circle altogether. Place names on each relationship so you know what is represent.
4. Look at the names and ask yourself, do you:
 - Lack intimacy in relationship intended by God to be close?
 - Allow people close into your heart who shouldn’t even be there?
 - House false intimacy and counterfeits to sooth the missing intimacy needs?

Consumers Vs. Producers

Our relationship with human being will fall into one of two categories. They will either participate in the consumption of our inner life resources. Or they will contribute and offer us the resource of love to assist God with having our needs met. In a healthy relationship, we are both consumers and producers. But in an imbalanced relationships, we are on one side or the other. People that have too many consumers have someone eating fruit from their garden around the clock. As a result they are stripped bared and depleted. They have nothing to give back and grow tired and exhausted. Allowing people to overly consume without giving is a boundary issue.

Others of us overly need or take in relationships. We can unknowingly depend and ask a person to give to us and meet our needs. Sometimes these are needs not intended for people to meet. When we are overly consuming, we are depriving that person and ourselves. Consumers never get satisfied and always want more. That’s because true healthy growth requires that the fruit be eaten in order to produce more. Thus, living a life of meeting our own needs will drive barrenness rather than fulfillment.

Action Step: Go back to your Intimacy Map. Next to each name write C for Consumer (meaning that person consumes your resources), P for Producer (meaning that person gives you resources without your giving), and write M for Mutual (healthy giving and receiving.) This should be telling of where you inner life has developed.

Where to Go Next

Once you have a basic definition of your own boundary system and placement, you know where the work of healing involved. This is a process we will be covering individually and within the context of relationships next year. What can you do right now? Focus on that God ocean. If you are lacking love for your spouse or close family members, ask God to first fill you. If you are being overly consumed by people, ask God to help you sort and If you are enabling bad behavior out of fear of losing a relationship, begin to learn more about the cycle of enabling (we have other resources available for this.)