

BOUNDARIES

Counseling Guide

DBU
COUNSELING CENTER
DALLAS BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

WHAT IS A BOUNDARY?

A boundary is a limit that distinguishes one individual from another. In the same sense that a fence marks where a house begins and another property begins, spiritual and emotional boundaries reflect where people begin and end. In other words, they show what is “mine” and what belongs to others. A good example of a physical boundary is skin. Skin is a border that separates outside things (such as pollution and germs) from touching inside things (such as organs and veins). If skin was not in place there would be no protection over our bodies from things that could potentially harm us.

But should Christians even have boundaries?

The answer is **YES!**

Although Scripture leads us to “love one another” and “die to self” we must learn to not take these scriptures out of context. Setting boundaries will help people define a sense of responsibility for themselves and also create a sense of separateness from one another. Without boundaries we might harm other believers by enabling them, and therefore preventing them from taking personal responsibility for themselves or harming ourselves when we allow other people to take on our responsibilities.

KNAPSACKS AND BOULDERS

How can we tell when it is an appropriate time to draw a boundary? Here we have two concepts that will help you identify such circumstances (adapted from *Boundaries* by Cloud and Townsend)

KNAPSACKS

In Galatians 6, Paul explains that “each one shall bear his own load” (v.5). In this verse, the Greek word for “load” means knapsack. Knapsacks are our own individual loads to carry such as our thoughts, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, even our time. No one else is responsible for these, except us. In the same sense, we must NOT take responsibility for other people’s individual knapsacks because we will harm them in the long run. If we do so:

- We could potentially damage someone’s spiritual growth (Ephesians 4:14)
- In caring for someone else’s responsibilities, we might disregard our own and be poor stewards of our lives (Matthew 25:14-30)

BOULDERS

Picture yourself carrying a heavy boulder. Would you enjoy someone’s help? Verse 2 of Galatians 6 tells us that we must “bear one another’s burdens.” The Greek word for burdens here is “boulder.” These are the types of loads we must help each other carry. Notice that these loads are not individual responsibilities but circumstances such as crisis, tragedies, and losses in which people need the help of one another.

Can you see the difference now? Everyone is responsible for their own individual knapsacks, but we are also partially responsible to each other’s boulders.

FAMILY AND BOUNDARIES

Families are quite complex and unique units. Although no family is perfect, ideally one of their main jobs is to help each member define their responsibility and “loads.” In other words, families need to teach each member to be attached in a healthy way while at the same time maintain their own sense of self. Can you see how this can be a tricky job?

When parents grow up in homes where there are no clear boundaries, they produce homes with children who are also confused about their own boundaries. Let’s take a look at examples of what bad boundaries within the family can look like:

- Families who believe that being compliant is better than having a healthy sense of independence
- Parents who shame or guilt trip their children when they make independent choices because parents feel abandoned
- Children of families who feel responsible for their parents happiness
- Parents who neglect to teach their children any limits or keep them from experiencing any real consequences
- Families who think disagreeing with each other is sinful
- Parents who take on their children’s responsibilities, sabotaging their maturity and growth to adulthood

If any of these symptoms seem familiar to you, maybe it is a good time for you to check your own boundaries!

DO I HAVE GOOD BOUNDARIES?

The truth is that almost all of us have issues with boundaries. The important thing is to recognize how we struggle with them. Here are the four most common categories under which people typically fall.

1. THE PEOPLE PLEASER

This individual never says no. In fact, it could be said that their identity comes from pleasing others. This type of individual says yes often out of guilt or fear that other people would not accept them if they say no. If this individual were to say no, they would disappoint others which would in turn disappoint themselves. However, in Galatians Paul warns us about pleasing men “too much” and instead turns the focus on pleasing God.

2. THE “I-HAVE-NO-NEEDS”

This individual believes it is not okay to have needs (because they feel guilty asking for anything) or is unaware of their own needs because they are too busy focusing on other people’s needs. Although this thinking might come with good intentions, this individual is not taking care of themselves and in place is robbing others of the opportunity to learn to be responsible for themselves.

3. THE SOMEONE-ELSE-CAN-DO-IT

This type of individual does not hear “no.” As a result, they tend to place their responsibilities onto other people. This is because they have learned to manipulate others into getting their needs met. This is most likely a boundary issue that started at home with parents who always took their children’s responsibilities. In turn, they grow up to believe things will work out because someone else will take care of their problems.

4. THE NEVER-SAY-YES

This individual struggles with ever saying yes to helping people with those boulders that are difficult to carry. These people are often labeled as selfish or narcissistic because they neglect from acknowledging other people’s needs. In turn, they place responsibility on other people who are codependent and will say yes to every demand. It is important to recognize that it is okay to struggle and seek help. No one is out of the reach of finding solutions. In fact, most people might be unaware of their boundary issues!

JESUS ON BOUNDARIES

Jesus is the best example for healthy boundaries and this is because he understood how to love others while being responsible for himself. Jesus met the needs of those around him (healing of the blind man, forgiving the sins of the adulterer) from a place of love rather than seeking approval. In addition, he allowed people to make their own choices creating responsibility for their actions. For example, when he encounter the Rich Young Ruler, he did not tell him, “Oh, it’s okay if you do not want to give up your wealth for me... we’ll work it out!” Instead, he allowed him to make a choice without taking his responsibility away. He did all of this while simultaneously loving those around him and even saving them!

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

- Is my identity coming from serving others?
- Do I seek approval of others through always being available?
- Do I say yes out of fear and guilt?
- Do I say no too often because of lack of trust?
- Am I too critical towards the needs of others?

If you are struggling with boundaries, you are not alone! It is important to take ownership and responsibility. Boundaries are all about understanding what we are responsible for and what we are not. Seeking help is a great step to take appropriate ownership of our lives. The DBU Counseling Center is a safe and free environment to discuss struggles such as this. We would love to help you develop healthy boundaries and help you become more self-aware.