

“Are You Building Good Boundaries?”

Genesis 27:1-40

Sermon Series: *Boundaries* Week 2. *How Boundaries Are Developed*

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When you watch those Christmas specials like Rudolph, the gifts Santa gives are “a scooter for Jimmy, a dolly for Sue the kind that will even say, ‘How do you do?’” The children receive footballs, tinker-toys, a wooden train. When I asked my three-year-old grandson Ben what he wants Santa to bring, he said, “I want him to fix my iPad.” Times have changed.

Yet I think the best gift he received for Christmas was a bunch of colored cardboard boxes...in the shape of bricks. We had a grand time building forts, castles, and the tallest tower in the world. He loved living in his own personal fortress. Then I gave him a little girl toy to hold so he could climb the Empire State Building and give out a roar worthy of King Kong.

Yet every time we built something with these bricks he always wanted to play another game – a game he has played from the time he was 18 months – KaBoom! Ben feels it is his God-given mission in life to knock down every wall I build. At three-years-old he is teaching his fifty-three year old Grandpa about boundaries.

Last Sunday we learned that boundaries show me where I end and someone else begins, what is my responsibility and what is not. Today we will look at how to build healthy boundaries. Christian psychologists Drs. Cloud and Townsend say,

Remember the old saying, “Insanity is genetic. You inherit it from your kids”? Well, boundaries aren’t inherited. They are built. To be the truth-telling, responsible, free, and loving people God wants us to be we need to learn limits from childhood on. Boundary development is an ongoing process, yet its most crucial stages are in our very early years, where our character is formed. (*Boundaries* p. 64).

My brick building game with Ben reveals that the role of a parent or grandparent is to build healthy boundaries for children. At the same time, it is a child’s job to push against those boundaries in a safe way. As we examine the process of building boundaries, I encourage you to ask yourself two questions:

1. How am I building boundaries with the people in my life?
2. How were boundaries built (or not built) in my life?

Building good boundaries begins when we are babies. This is called **Bonding**. A close, safe, nurturing bond between a parent and a child is essential for development into a healthy, whole adult. Bonding is the bedrock on which we build boundaries. When babies come into the world their first need is to know they are loved, protected and nurtured. A person will feel insecure later in life if they do not feel secure at the

beginning of life. Unfortunately, not all parents develop a loving bond with their babies and children. Through the prophet Isaiah, God asks the Israelites this question:

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Isaiah 49:15)

The bond between mother and child should be strong. Parent and baby should bond. Yet that doesn't always happen. There is a condition called FTT. The letters mean "Failure To Thrive." The causes are diverse and difficult to pin down but one reason is a lack of nurturing from a parent. You've probably heard stories of children in poorly staffed orphanages who exhibit this condition. Yet God says even if the parent-child bond is broken, His unconditional love never gives up. Cloud and Townsend add,

Our deepest need is to belong, to be in a relationship, to have a spiritual and emotional "home." The very nature of God is to be in relationship: "God is love," says 1 John 4: 16. Love means relationship—the caring, committed connection of one individual to another. Like God, our most central need is to be connected. You can't develop or set boundaries apart from supportive relationships with God and others. Don't even try to start setting limits until you have entered into deep, abiding attachments with people who will love you no matter what. (*Boundaries* p. 66)

After Bonding, the next step is **Separating**. During the first four months of life, mother and baby are one in the eyes of the baby. There is no distinction. During the second half of year one, the baby starts to separate and develop an identity. All that nurturing pays off. The little one feels secure enough to do some exploring. They want to take the world in through their senses...especially their mouths. My grandson Isaac is at that stage. Nearly every toy he received for Christmas was chewable. While sitting on Santa's lap, St. Nick jingled a bell. You can tell Isaac is thinking, "Stop teasing me big guy and pop that in my mouth."

The separation phase is the time to begin building boundaries. As a child develops an identity over the next months and years he or she learns to use two powerful words: "No" and "Why?" Parents don't like these words. I couldn't wait until the "No" phase passed with my kids (it happened last week). And as for "Why?" before I was a parent I vowed to patiently explain every reason to my kids. But when my kids asked "Why?" for what seemed like the four thousandth time, I said those dreaded seven last words: "Because I said so. I'm the dad."

Believe it or not, good boundaries depend on your children learning to say "No" and "Why?" Remember how I said a child's job is to push against the boundaries? That's what they do when they use these two powerful words. How can this be good? For one thing, when your children go out into the world without you, you want them to ask "Why?" when someone encourages them to do something out of bounds and to say "No" when someone tries to do something wrong with them or to them. As painful as it is at times, all those years of testing the limits helps a parent and child set and keep clear boundaries. Think back to the pictures of Ben's building blocks. Sometimes parents set

boundaries that are so confining the child doesn't learn how to safely explore and navigate through life. On the other hand, when parents set very loose or no boundaries, the kid becomes King Kong and terrorizes everyone around. "No" is not a bad word. Even Jesus said, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No;,' anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37). Cloud and Townsend say,

Parents have two tasks associated with no. First, they need to help their child feel safe enough to say no, thereby encouraging his or her own boundaries. Though they certainly can't make all the choices they'd like, young children should be able to have a no that is listened to. Informed parents won't be insulted or enraged by their child's resistance. They will help the child feel that his no is just as loveable as his yes. The second task facing parents of children is helping the child respect others' boundaries. Children need to be able to not only give a no, but also take a no.

Think back to your own childhood. Did you receive the nurturing love of your parents? Did they give you a bedrock sense of security? Were they clear about boundaries? Were the boundaries too confining or too loose? Did they hear your "No" and "Why?" and help you to develop your own boundaries? Or did they respond with hostility or withdraw their love? Did they teach you to hear other's "No" and respect their boundaries?

An excellent example of where this was done very badly is in the Bible. We can see what NOT to do in the family of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac, the son of Abraham, favored their brawny, hairy older son Esau. But his wife Rebekah doted on their softer, more sensitive younger boy Jacob. When old Isaac was blind and near death he wanted to bless his first born. In those days, they believed a blessing was more than a wish. It had the power to determine a child's future for good or ill. It was also the custom to give the first-born the most and the best and let the younger have the rest.

Not if Rebekah had anything to say about it. When she hears her nearly blind husband Isaac send Esau out to prepare a meal for him, Rebekah quickly calls in Jacob,

Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies." (Genesis 27:8-10).

She's not a bit concerned about lying to her sick husband or tricking her oldest son out of what's coming to him. Maybe Rebekah has her reasons. Perhaps Esau caused her a lot of grief growing up. Maybe she thinks the tradition of favoring the first born is unfair and ought to be changed. But instead of addressing it directly, she works up a scheme behind the scenes.

In this scene, Rebekah is what Cloud and Townsend call a **Controller**. She doesn't acknowledge someone else's rights. She can't hear or respect someone else's "No." Controllers won't take "No" for an answer. There are two types of Controllers. One is Aggressive. They roll right over someone's fences.

They are sometimes verbally abusive, sometimes physically abusive. But most of the time they simply aren't aware that others even have boundaries. It's as if they live in a world of yes. There's no place for someone else's no. (*Boundaries* p. 57)

Rebekah is really the other type: a Manipulative Controller. They smoothly talk others out of their boundaries. They work behind the scenes and massage situations to get their way. Through her actions, Rebekah is training Jacob to be this kind of Controller.

For now, he is more what Cloud and Townsend call a **Compliant**. He goes along with his mother's plan. If a Controller can't hear "No," a Compliant can't say, "No." They go along with the crowd. They overcommit and say "Yes" to too many things and then secretly resent others.

Compliant people have fuzzy and indistinct boundaries; they "melt" into the demands and needs of other people. They can't stand alone, distinct from people who want something from them. Many compliant people realize too late that they're in a dangerous or abusive relationship. (*Boundaries* p. 52-53)

Compliant people are afraid to say "No" for various reasons. They fear rejection and punishment, anger and abandonment. They don't want to hurt others' feelings or appear to be selfish. They may even have an overly critical conscience. Though he knows it's not right, Jacob complies with his mother's scheme. He doesn't protest or expose the dishonesty. His only concern is getting caught.

Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I'm a man with smooth skin. What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing." His mother said to him, "My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me." (Genesis 27:11-13).

Rebekah will soon regret those words.

What part does father Isaac play in this family drama? He's what might be called a **Nonresponsive**. When it comes to the sibling rivalry that's been brewing between the brothers for years, Isaac takes a very passive role. Nonresponsive people don't hear the needs of others. They don't want to get involved. Esau, the eldest completes the set by being an **Avoidant**. He is the strong, silent, self-sufficient hunter. In this story you get the feeling that he is always out on his own. He doesn't let others in or ask for support.

Why is avoidance a boundary problem? At the heart of the struggle is a confusion of boundaries as walls. Boundaries are supposed to be able to "breathe," to be like fences with a gate that can let the good in and the bad out. Individuals with walls for boundaries can let in neither bad nor good. No one touches them. (*Boundaries* p. 55)

So to summarize:

- Compliant can't say, "No"
- Controller can't hear, "No"
- Nonresponsive can't say, "Yes"
- Avoidant can't hear, "Yes."

Which one are you? Where do the people in your family fall?

What happened in this family? This is one time Jacob should have said, "No" to his mother. Yet pride convinces him he is better than Esau and fear makes him tremble at the thought of being caught. So he puts on his brother's coat, straps on the goatskin suit and carries the tasty meal into his father. Notice how many times he has the opportunity to tell the truth.

He went to his father and said, "My father." "Yes, my son," he answered. "Who is it?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game so that you may give me your blessing." Isaac asked his son, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?" "The LORD your God gave me success," he replied. (Genesis 27:18-20).

Jacob even pulls God in to back up his lie.

Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near so I can touch you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not." Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." "Are you really my son Esau?" he asked. "I am," he replied. Then he said, "My son, bring me some of your game to eat, so that I may give you my blessing." Jacob brought it to him and he ate; and he brought some wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come here, my son, and kiss me." So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him. (Genesis 27:21-27).

Deception sealed with a kiss. Jacob is barely out of his father's tent when Esau arrives and the truth is revealed. Isaac shakes with fury about being fooled. Esau rages at his runt brother who tricked him again. Jacob flees from the wrath of his bow and arrow wielding sibling and Rebekah, for her part in the whole charade, will never see the face of her beloved boy again. The curse did fall on her.

A lack of boundaries still brings a curse down on families today.

Jim had never been able say no to anyone, especially to his supervisors at work. He'd moved up the ladder in a large firm. His dependability had earned him the reputation of "Mr. Can Do." But his kids had another name for him: "The Phantom." Jim was never home. Being "Mr. Can Do" meant late nights at the office. It meant business dinners several nights a week. It meant weekends on the road, even after he'd promised the kids fishing trips and trips to the zoo.

Jim didn't like being absent so much, but he had justified it to himself, saying, This is my contribution to the kids, my way of giving them the good life. His wife, Alice, had rationalized the "dadless dinners" by telling the children (and herself), "This is Dad's way of telling us he loves us." And she almost believed it.

Finally, however, Alice had had enough. One night she sat Jim down on the couch in the family room and said, "I feel like a single parent, Jim. I missed you for a while, but now all I feel is nothing." Jim avoided her eyes. "Honey, I know, I know," he replied. "I'd really like to say no to people more, but it's just so hard to—" "I found someone you can say no to," Alice broke in. "Me and the kids!" That did it. Something broke deep within Jim. A sense of pain, of guilt and shame, of helplessness and rage. The words tumbled out of his mouth. "Do you think I like being like this, always giving in to others? Do you think I enjoy letting my family down?" Jim paused, struggling for composure. "All my life it's been this way, Alice. I've always feared letting people down. I hate this part of me. I hate my life. How did I get like this?" (*Boundaries* p. 63-64)

Do you ask yourself that question?

Let's work together to start building better boundaries...before everything comes tumbling down.

