

“How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Conflicts”

Ephesians 4:22-32

Series: Boundaries Week 6. How Do You Measure Boundary Success?

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My grandfather Hoglund was from Sweden. My grandmother was Norwegian. Scandinavians are known for many things: Vikings, Swedish meatballs, IKEA. But they are not famous for passionate emotion. In fact, they are not known for any emotion...whatsoever. You don't hear about a lot of romantic movies coming from Sweden or Norway. If they have chick flicks there, they're probably about chickens.

At least this was true about my grandfather. But he wanted to do something romantic. Trouble was: he also didn't understand American customs about how to express love. Then he learned there is a special day in February that Americans celebrate. This time he was going to get it right. He bought my grandmother flowers and a box of chocolates and a card which probably said, "My dear, of all the days of the year, this day reminds me of you." Sounds good. There was just one slight problem. He didn't give her the card and gifts on February 14th Valentine's Day. He gave them to her on February 2nd Ground Hog's Day.

And that's how the fight started.

I can't think of a better day to conclude our series on Boundaries than Valentine's Day. The entire goal of this series is to help you have healthier, more loving relationships through the building of clear boundaries. Remember that boundaries are property lines in my relationships which indicate where I begin and end, what is my responsibility and what is not. I hope, over these weeks, you've been able to implement some of the ten laws of boundaries.

So today, let's see if you are making any progress toward establishing health boundaries. We'll use a measuring tool called a Boundary Barometer. A Barometer measures the air pressure to forecast if the weather will be calm and dry or wet and stormy. In the middle, at high noon, is one simple word: change. The Boundary Barometer offers seven ways to evaluate if your relationships are characterized by stormy raw emotions, eerily calm silent treatments or positive, productive change. Hopefully, when you ask the question, "How do I love thee?" you'll be able to count less conflicts and more cooperation, communication and care.

1. How Do I Handle Anger and Resentment? Paul tells the Ephesians:

"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. (Ephesians 4:26-27, 31)

Anger is a fact of life. We all experience it, especially when someone crosses one of our boundaries. In that moment we can repress the anger and say, "I'm fine" through clenched teeth. Or we can express it explosively. Anger, whether boiling, simmering or

suppressed, is an open doorway for the devil to exploit. David Slagle was working as a nurse in the emergency room when a couple arrived, both with gunshot wounds. The husband woke up late for his first day on the job because his wife did not set the alarm. He expressed his displeasure by shooting her in the arm. Not to be outdone, she retreated to another room, got a shotgun, and shot him in the arm. While trying to gather their paperwork in the hospital, David heard something incredible. Separated by a deputy sheriff and handcuffed to their respective stretchers, the husband began: "I love you, baby, and I'm sorry I shot you." The wife responded, "I love you too, baby, and I'm sorry I shot you." David said it sounded like something from a bad country western song. The conclusion: don't shoot off your mouth in anger.

It's not wrong to get angry. Paul understands that anger is a human emotion. His advice is don't let your anger spiral out of control into sin. It's best to resolve it and reconcile quickly...before sundown. Unload the bitterness, resentment and rage by being assertive. Remember, to be assertive is to state your boundary while not attacking or violating the other person's rights. Where are you on the barometer?

2. How Do I Handle Guilty Feelings? When you start to create boundaries, you may possibly hear inside your head the voice of judgment or guilt. "How could you be so insensitive or selfish? How can you call yourself a Christian and not keep helping her or him?" Compliant people are obsessively guilt ridden. That inner voice condemns and keeps them from drawing a boundary. They feel they have no right to say "No." At the other extreme is the controller who is oblivious to any feelings of guilt. They have no problem rolling over other's boundaries. According to Paul, it's not God's will for us to be stuck in a swamp of guilt. Worldly guilt holds us hostage in a prison of condemnation. Godly guilt drives us to seek forgiveness and be free. This is why Paul says,

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Listen to God and obey Him. He wants us to live by grace, not guilt.

3. Am I Able to Say "No"? This is the heart of healthy boundaries. Some feel they never have the right to say, "No." Paul says this is like babies lost at sea.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. (Ephesians 4:14)

If you can't say "No" you are as defenseless against the lies and abuse of others as a baby stuck in a storm on the sea. At the other extreme are those who always say, "No" and wind up isolated and alone.

The freedom to say, “No” means you can decide, based on your rights and feelings, whether you want to commit or refrain. The truth is, you can’t genuinely say “Yes” if you aren’t also free to say, “No.” If you are new to boundaries, Drs. Cloud and Townsend recommend starting with a baby “No.” Say “No” to Brussel sprouts or a Thai restaurant or an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. Then work your way up to saying “No” to constantly working overtime or to your child’s tantrums before you take on the bigger “No” to your husband or wife’s tantrums and misbehavior. To do this effectively, you will need the next barometer.

4. Do I Ask Others for Help? As we’ve learned throughout this series, boundaries are not built in a vacuum. We need the support, honesty and accountability of others to lay the foundation for these boundaries. Paul says don’t be an infant tossed back and forth by others’ abuse:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:15, 29)

It is just as unhealthy to bottle up your emotions as it is to run around telling everyone your problems. All you need are one or two accountability partners. Paul tells us to give a trusted brother or sister the permission to speak the truth in love to us about a boundary problem. Unwholesome talk, such as gossip, sarcasm, or judgments should not come out your mouths. This is not a gripe session. Nor is this what psychologists call “triangulation” where you try rope someone in to be on your side against another person. An objective third person can help you decide, according to your needs, how to build a boundary and then hold you accountable to follow through with it. They might help you get started with a baby “No” before you take on the big ones. They can also stand by you and help you stick with it in the face of angry or guilty feelings.

5. How Do I Care for My Treasures? We believe God is the owner of all things. Yet Scripture also teaches that God graciously gives us all things - our bodies and minds, feelings, thoughts and attitudes, finances and time - for our benefit and to bless others. These are our treasures. These are also the things which often are trampled or taken from us when we have no boundaries. If you think of your most difficult boundary problems in the past or present, they probably involve someone who asked you for money, someone who took up all your time, someone who hurt or abused your body, someone who attacked your feelings, thoughts and attitudes. Without a firm boundary, people can steal your treasures. Paul expressly speaks against this.

Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need. Eph. 4:28

Great fiery feuds are ignited by small thefts. In 1878, Randolph McCoy of Kentucky made an accusation against one of the Hatfield clan of West Virginia. This lit

the fuse of America's most infamous feud. The war between the Hatfields and McCoys eventually led to the shooting death of Ellison Hatfield in 1882. Retaliation beget retaliation until the feud claimed 11 more family members. For the next 125 years, the Hatfields and McCoys fueled the feud. What started this great conflagration? The McCoy's said the Hatfield's stole a pig.

On June 14th, 2003, Sixty descendants of the original Hatfield and McCoy clans gathered in Pikefield, Kentucky, with the governors of Kentucky and West Virginia, to sign a document declaring an official end to more than a century of hatred and bloodshed. The treaty reads:

We do hereby and formally declare an official end to all hostilities...between the families, now and forevermore. We ask by God's grace and love that we be forever remembered as those that bound together the hearts of two families to form a family of freedom in America.

God, by His grace and love, can help you care for your treasures and share your treasures instead of feud over them.

6. Do I Respect Others Boundaries? Another sign you are making progress in building boundaries is your ability to gracefully accept others' boundaries. In the past when some said, "No" to your request you may have felt crushed and rejected. Or you may have fought back, twisted their arm or trampled their boundary. Paul tells us

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. (Ephesians 4:25)

If you respect others' boundaries, they will feel safe to speak truthfully to you instead of making up false reasons why they can't comply with your request. I know this boundaries course is working because recently, when I've tried to recruit members to do something, they've said, "No." Then they immediately follow that up with, "Hey Pastor, this boundary thing works. Thank you so much for helping me to say, "No." "Your welcome...I think." Truly, one of the most important lessons I've learned in ministry is the ability to graciously accept someone's "No." Why? As Paul says we are all members of one body. The way we treat one another, the truth we tell one another, affects all of us. The more gracious, respectful and truthful we are with one another – in a marriage, a family, a workplace, a church – the healthier that body will be.

7. How Do I Make Plans? Finally, you know you are making progress with boundaries when you live not to please others or control others. A person with mature boundaries lives according to their values. As followers of Jesus our ultimate goal is to follow the two great commandments

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Filled with God’s love, we are able to give away the overflow of that love to others without a hidden motive to get love out of them or to control them. This is not as easy as it sounds. Paul describes it as a process of taking off the old selfish, boundaryless self and putting on the new self which God created for you.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:22-24

Like an old ragged worn out coat, Paul tells us to throw away the old way of life that is no longer working for us. Next, he tells us to get a new attitude, a new mind, a new way of looking at life. That’s what we’ve been trying to do since the beginning of 2016 – to discover a new way of looking at life through the concept of boundaries. Yet even Paul says that attitudes and ideas are not enough. You have to go the next step and put on the new suit, the new self which God created for you. It’s a life patterned after Jesus, a life of righteousness and holiness. It will take practice, patience and a few trustworthy people in your life to build these boundaries. But fear not: you also have a Carpenter on your side. If you are willing to do the work and follow His direction, He will help you build holy and righteous relationships – even with your enemies.

During World War II, Corrie ten Boom and her family secretly housed Jews in their home. As followers of Jesus, they knew this was what God wanted. When their “illegal” activity was discovered, Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbruck, a Nazi Concentration Camp. Corrie would watch many, including her sister, die in that hell on earth. After the war she returned to Germany to declare the grace of Christ.

It was 1947, and I'd come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture.

“When we confess our sins,” I said, “God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, ‘NO FISHING ALLOWED.’”

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush—the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me,

ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard—one of the most cruel guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!” And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard there.” No, he did not remember me. “But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.

But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!” For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.

If God can heal that relationship, he can surely heal yours.