

“That’s Out of Bounds”

Ephesians 5:8-20

Series: Boundaries Week 4. Boundary Conflicts

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It’s late in the third quarter. A trip to the Super Bowl is on the line. The Houston Oilers, trailing the Steelers in Pittsburgh, are about to tie up the game. Oilers quarterback Dan Pastorini takes the snap on the 6 yard line and finds Mike Renfro at the back of the end zone for a crucial touchdown. Or was it? The officials are not raising their arms in the familiar goal post fashion. Renfro is furious. The refs are not sure. Was he in bounds when he caught the ball?

This is the 1979 AFC Championship game. In the dark ages before officials used instant replay, they had to rely on what they saw. The TV commentators review the tape and declare that Renfro’s feet were in bounds when he caught the ball. The officials huddle to make a decision. All around them the hometown Steelers fans are in a frenzy. Finally the call comes: Incomplete pass. No Touchdown. The Steelers go on to win the game 27-13 and advance to defeat the Los Angeles Rams in Super Bowl XIV. That however, didn’t stop the controversy over the out of bounds call. ESPN declares it to be one of the ten worst calls in all Sports History.

You and I have moments in our relationships when we want to call something “out of bounds.” Sometimes you may even wish some referees would throw a penalty flag, issue a ruling or review the instant replay. Then again...maybe that’s not such a good idea. And thank God our relationships are not broadcast on national television surrounded by 50,000 screaming fans. There’s a term for that. It’s called “Reality TV.”

Yet what do you do when one of your relationships is out of bounds? In our study of Boundaries so far we’ve learned that a boundary is the invisible property line which shows me where I end and you begin, what is my responsibility and what is not. We saw how boundaries do or do not develop. We then looked at Ten Laws of Boundaries. These are the heart of establishing boundaries in your relationships. Last week Gloria covered some common myths that prevent people from establishing boundaries. The most common barrier to creating boundaries is fear. We fear others will hurt us or they will think we are trying to hurt them when we stop enabling out of control behavior, when we cease complying with or controlling a person.

So now we have all the tools and the knowledge we need to start setting boundaries. How do we begin? In your bulletin you will find a seven step process for resolving boundary conflicts. I encourage you to take out that sheet, select someone – your spouse, children, family member, coworker, church member, neighbor, yourself, God – with whom you have a conflict. Don’t write their name on the page. Just picture the situation and jot down some answers as we go through these questions. Don’t worry, there is no instant replay filming what you are doing.

1. Identify the Symptoms In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. (Ephesians 5:8-11)

Many of us live in the darkness of denial or, worse, the darkness of family secrets. We cover over or hide serious issues. We minimize or rationalize our behavior or the actions of others. We stuff feelings down deep and tell everyone we are fine. Yet the feelings don't stay buried. They bubble up to the surface. Sometimes they burst or even explode over a situation which is completely unrelated to the real problem. Ask yourself this about your relationship: what feelings are the fruit of this relationship. Do you feel anxiety, anger, resentment, stress, worry or fear? Do you feel you can't forgive? Do you find you can't stop thinking about the situation? Do you find yourself arguing with the person in your head? Those feelings are often the fruit of a boundary conflict. Write down the symptoms you feel. Paul says a healthy relationship is lived in the Light of the Lord. A healthy relationship will be characterized by goodness, righteousness and truth. If you feel these other emotions, writing them down and talking them out will expose them and bring them into the Light.

2. Identify the Root Causes of the Symptoms. Jesus said "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit." (Matthew 12:33) The person is not bad but something is wrong in the relationship. It is the source of the symptoms you feel. Here are some roots that cause a relationship to yield bad fruit. These may be true of you, the other person, or both.

- a. Never learned how to set limits
- b. Always protected from facing consequences
- c. Out of control behavior was rewarded
- d. Fear of letting anyone get too close
- e. A hunger for love that was not given
- f. Rebellion against a strict upbringing
- g. Buried hurt from neglect or abuse
- h. Emotional hurt as an adult

There are many root causes to our pain. As in a garden, roots are often hard to reach. It may take counseling to uncover these roots. For now, write them on your paper. Jesus wants us to "make a tree good." He wants us to be free from these.

3. Identify the Boundary Conflict. Paul continues in Ephesians 5: But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:13,15-16)

What is the specific out of bounds behavior that needs to be brought to the Light? Paul warns us to stop fooling ourselves and seize the opportunity to begin working on the

boundary conflicts in our relationships. Here are some boundary conflicts which may be true of you, the other person, or both of you:

- a. Eating – using food for comfort or control
- b. Money – overspending, impulse spending, chronically in debt
- c. Time Management – missing deadlines, always last-minute and stressed
- d. Task Completion - promising but not completing tasks, resolutions, plans
- e. Words – gossip, sarcasm, anger, threats, lies, seduction
- f. Sexuality – caught up in out of bounds or out of control behavior
- g. Alcohol or Substance Abuse – is this negatively impacting family and career

If you see any of these boundary conflicts operating in one of your relationships, Paul says don't fool yourself. Be honest about it. Write it on your paper. Call it what it is.

4. Identify Who Needs to Take Responsibility As followers of Jesus, we must live God's way. This includes taking responsibility for our part in an unhealthy relationship. Paul writes,

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. (Ephesians 5:3-4)

I cannot control someone else's behavior. But I can recognize what is under my control and work to keep my side of the street clean. Paul tells us to begin with getting rid of sexual immorality, impurity and greed. These are summed up in a four letter word: lust.

How is lust different than love? The simple answer is lust takes, but love gives. Case in point: The *New England Journal of Medicine* reported a strange discovery made by French doctors in 2002. A 62-year-old man entered the hospital suffering from stomach pain. When doctors operated, they removed 12 pounds of coins as well as necklaces and needles. Despite his family's attempts to keep money and jewelry away from him, the man swallowed 350 coins over the course of a decade. The condition is known as "pica," a compulsion to swallow inedible items. The coin fixation of this particular patient badly damaged the man's stomach. Twelve days after doctors removed \$650 from his belly, he died.¹

Lust is an unnatural hunger for something normal. Money, food, medicine, alcohol and sex are normal. Lust creates an unnatural hunger for them. We crave more and more. We force something normal to fill an emptiness only God can satisfy. The result is often destructive and disastrous. Miss America 2003, Erika Harold, goes around the country speaking in high schools and prisons on the subject: "Teenage Sexual Abstinence: Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself." Once, Erica appeared before Congress and said,

¹ *Chicago Sun-Times* (2-19-04).

Ever since I can remember, I've had a commitment to abstinence. I was fortunate to have been raised by two loving parents who encouraged me to set high standards, to value myself, and to save myself for marriage. But I grew up knowing that I was lucky and that not every young person had the love and support I did. I saw many of my peers use sex to try to find that love and acceptance. But instead of being able to fill that void, many of them became teen parents, contracted diseases, and had their hearts broken. I used to feel badly for them and wish they had realized that being abstinent could have spared them from those consequences. However, I came to recognize that it was not enough to feel bad; I knew I had to take action. As Gandhi once said, "You must become the change you wish to see in the world."²

Lust takes. Lust is never satisfied. Lust destroys. Love gives. Love brings life. Live a life of love, not lust. Whether you lust for food, money, sex, alcohol, control, possessions or power, you can start to build healthy boundaries by receiving the love of Jesus who "loved us and gave himself up for us." You can also build boundaries but not enabling, supporting and encouraging the lust of the other person. Let them take responsibility for their part. On your paper, write down what you need to do for yourself and what you need to stop doing for the other person.

5. Identify What You Need to Proceed To build healthy boundaries we need the help of a few trusted confidential Christian friends. Paul writes,

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

To change a destructive pattern, to break through denial, we need someone from the outside to tell us the truth. We need a friend, a pastor, a loved one to hold up a mirror and help us see what we don't want to see, to see what is really going on, to see the toll it is taking. Yet we need someone who will speak this truth with love. Some of our friends are so loving they never tell us the truth while others are not very loving when they clobber us with the truth. We need truth and love because, as Paul says, that's the way we grow up and mature. As members of the Body of Christ, we are connected to each other, we depend on each other. Any unhealthy part in the Body or the family affect all the other parts. On your paper, write down the name of one or two people you trust – people who love you and will tell you the truth you need to hear.

6. How Do You Begin? What is the first step you must take to lay the foundation for a better boundary? In one sense you have already begun by identifying and writing down the conflict on your paper. Yet analysis and exercises like these only go so far. Vows to stop acting out or enabling others are usually useless. Promises to change are often not worth a handful of change. The place to begin is with the Lord. Paul says,

² From Statement to Congress by Erika N. L. Harold, Miss America 2003,

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. (Ephesians 5:17-18)

To lay the foundation for a solid boundary we need to begin with the will of the Lord in God's Word and the power of the Spirit. Why? You and I are an empty cup. We go through life seeking people or things to fill our cup. This is the ultimate reason we find it hard to say "No." We want to be liked and loved and we feel if we say "Yes" they will fill our cup with love. If we do what they want, they will fill our cup with love. If we enable their behavior, they will fill our cup with love. The same is true when we lust for money, sex, power, possessions or alcohol. We want to fill our cup. The trouble is, they never satisfy, they never fulfill us. Why? They weren't designed to. They weren't intended to.

Only the presence and power of God is able to fill us up. We need to be filled by the Spirit. Scholars point out that the verb tense in this verse is a continuous one – continually be filled by the Spirit. This is not a one-time topping off of your life. You wouldn't eat once for the rest of your life. You don't fill the tank once for the life of your car. You keep being filled. This is why prayer and God's Word are so essential. In fact on Saturday, February 20th we will offer a free showing of the movie "The War Room." It's the story of broken family relationships and poor boundaries that were healed by the power of prayer and the power of the Spirit. That movie will kick off a five week message series for Lent entitled, "Too Busy NOT to Prayer." We'll discover the purpose, the power, the practice, the promise and the peace of prayer. Invite a friend or family member to join you for the movie and the message series. For the only way you can build healthy, godly boundaries is if the love of God fills you and overflows to others. If God's overflowing love fills me, I can give it to you freely. I don't need to squeeze love out of you to fill my cup.

7. What Accountability and Consequences Do You Need to Keep Going?

When someone comes out of a 30, 60 or 90 day rehab program, they must continue in a support group such as AA or NA or they will be right back where they were before entering the clinic. Paul tells us we all need accountability: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). Submission is equal and it is humble. I give you permission to hold me accountable and you do the same. I ask you to speak the truth with love to me and you allow me to do the same. I ask you to let me deal with the consequences of my actions and I don't save you from facing the consequences of your actions. I practice saying "no" with you, you tell me "no" and we still respect each other. We both do all this out of our love and devotion for Jesus Christ. The Alpha Marriage course is a great way for couples to go through the process I just described and to learn to lovingly hold each other accountable for healing change.

J. Granger received a call from his son Scott. For most of us, that would be welcome news. But not in the Granger household. Drugs were tearing their family apart and for the last twenty-four months they'd not see or heard from the boy. He recalls,

Through years of drug abuse, Scott had stolen from our family, manipulated us, and failed us. It had been a relief not to hear from him for two years. Scott told me he'd been through a rehabilitation program a year and a half ago that provided something no other had offered. "I met Jesus Christ. I've been forgiven for my past. I want to ask you and Mom to forgive me, too." He said he was now helping other addicts get straightened out. I was torn between hope and cynicism. The well-groomed, bright-eyed young man who arrived at the airport looked like a stranger.

In the days that followed, Scott told how, in the midst of drug withdrawal, he'd seen a vision of Jesus Christ on the cross and cried out to him for help. That experience had led him to a church. "I asked Jesus to be my Lord," he quietly explained, "and my life hasn't been the same since." The change in Scott was too dramatic for my wife and me to ignore. Today, Jesus has given us the same new life he gave our prodigal son.³

You can keep debating about a relationship that's out of bounds. Or you can start to do something about it today.

³ J. Granger, *Sons: A Father's Love* (Word, 1999), quoted in *Men of Integrity*, Vol. 3, no. 2

