

## **“Where Do You Draw the Line?”**

Galatians 6:1-5

*Series: Boundaries Week 1. What Are Boundaries?*

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When we were boys, my brother and I shared a room. Now it's not hard to imagine that two boys in one bedroom is a formula for fights. Nothing major mind you. We did the usual teasing, pushing and wrestling boys do at that age. There were a few times, however, when the hostilities escalated to the brink of all-out war. At that crisis stage I proposed a cease fire and bilateral peace talks. Thinking myself so smart, I suggested the way to halt further aggression is a boundary line. Divide the room in half with the border running between our two desks, two beds and cutting our night stand in half. You stay on your side and I'll stay on mine. We can live in peace on our respective sovereign territories. Any unauthorized border crossings will be met with swift and decisive retribution. So we drew the line down the middle with string and settled into our cold war.

Now the reason I thought I was so smart is my half of the room had the door to get out. My brother was trapped on his side of the room - when our Mother called for dinner or when nature called for-well you know - he would not be able to answer the call. It was a great plan except for one little fact I forgot - my brother is older, bigger and stronger than me. Whenever he wanted to leave, he simply crossed the border and flattened me like Sherman going through Atlanta. Turned out my dumb brain was squashed by his brawn.

Where do you draw the line? Usually, we draw a line as a warning or an ultimatum. “That’s it. I’ve had enough. I’m drawing the line. If you cross this line, if you do that one more time, I’m done. I’m gone. I’m out-a-here.” Nations draw a line in the sand as a threshold, a final step before going to war. Yet we don’t have to draw a line as a threat. In fact, if two people are willing to draw a line in a relationship when things are going well, they might prevent further conflicts and create more health and peace. We didn’t know it then, but when my brother and I laid that string down the middle of our bedroom we created a boundary in our relationship.

Boundaries are essential for a healthy relationship. This is true in your family, your neighborhood, your friendships, your work colleagues, and here at church. We even need boundaries with those who oppose us, with whom we disagree. Why are boundaries so important? Do you:

- Take on too many tasks
- Find it hard to say “No”
- Feel people take advantage of you
- Fill up with resentment or self-pity at what others do
- Get frustrated when your child or teen doesn’t do what you say
- Attempt to manage or control an adult’s behavior

- Feel guilty when you try to set limits
- Wonder what to do when someone demands your time, money or energy
- Feel like you are letting everyone, including God, down

If so, there's a good chance you need boundaries in your life. Having crossed the line into the New Year, now is a good time to work on building healthy relationships through the creation of clear boundaries.

In their bestselling book *Boundaries*, Christian Psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend explain,

Boundaries define us. They define *what is me* and *what is not me*. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership. (*Boundaries* p. 31)

Boundaries are like the property line between you and your neighbor. I learned a personal lesson about boundaries this summer. Between my backyard and the neighbor directly behind there was a beautiful green screen of trees and bushes. From Spring through Fall you could not see their yard. Then I went away on vacation. The day I returned something was different. All the trees and shrubs were gone. A few weeks later, a large white vinyl fence separated our yards. I have to admit I was bummed out. Yet the trees, shrubs and fence were all on their property. They own them and have every right to do what they want with them. Moreover, the reason for the fence was probably to keep their large black dog in their yard – for which I am grateful.

Boundaries in relationships are not as visible and tangible as foliage or fences. Yet they perform the same function: to define what I own and what I don't, what is my responsibility and what is not. There is freedom in knowing where my responsibility begins and ends. Problems begin when I don't know what I own, when I try to manage someone else's responsibility or when someone steps over the line and tramples me as when my brother crossed our string boundary line.

In the beginning, God made us responsible beings. The very first commandments He gave to Adam, Eve and us were:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:28)

He made us the stewards, the caretakers of His creation. Notice, this is not a chore but a blessing. He's the owner, but God lets us enjoy and benefit from what is His. At the same time, God gave us boundaries from the beginning so we would not abuse His creation or one another.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from

any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” (Genesis 2:15-17)

And we all know how well we kept that boundary. As a matter of fact, if you recall The Story which we started this time last year you will remember how often God gave us clear boundaries in the Bible. We call them Covenants. The most famous example is the Ten Commandments. They define what is our role – put God first, honor his name, get good rest, worship the Lord - and what’s off limits – your neighbor’s life, spouse, stuff and all the idols. God knows we need boundaries. After all, He built us that way. Like property lines and fences, it’s important to set mental, physical, emotional spiritual boundaries for our lives to help us know what is our responsibility and what is not.

Now some Christians may object that establishing boundaries flies in the face of Jesus’ teachings about self-sacrifice. On the night of His arrest He said:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. (John 15:12-14)

That sounds like love without limits. True. Jesus not only taught unconditional love, He also lived it. Many of His parables – the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the Good Samaritan - gives examples of people who go out of their way to love the least and the lost. Yet there is a great difference between loving a person in spite of their sin and enabling a person to continue in sin. Even Jesus gave specific directions about what to do when a person is caught in sin.

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17)

Now that sounds harsh until you remember they called Jesus “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19). Jesus kept loving those no one loved while, at the same time, seeking to free them from an out-of-control, destructive life. Knowing where to draw the line between loving and enabling is one of the helpful tools we receive when we have healthy boundaries.

The clip we viewed about Sherrie’s boundaryless life is a good illustration of the difference. As a wife, mother, worker and a Christian she feels the need to take responsibility for the people around her. Cloud and Townsend say,

In her desire to do the right thing, or to avoid conflict, she ends up taking on problems that God never intended her to take on: her mother’s chronic loneliness, her boss’ irresponsibility, her friend’s unending crises, her church leader’s guilt-ridden message of self-sacrifice, and her husband’s immaturity. Sherrie’s inability

to say no has significantly affected her son's ability to behave himself in school.  
(*Boundaries* p. 27)

Sherrie is no slacker. She keeps trying harder to please the people around her but it's not working and she is getting burned out. When I proposed this study of *Boundaries* some men thought this was more of a women's issue. Well guys, maybe women have an issue with boundaries because we've created it. I'm not trying to start a battle between the sexes. Actually, I'm trying to diffuse it by helping everyone develop healthy relationships by establishing clear boundaries.

The truth is: when it comes to boundaries we need each other. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes,

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load. (Galatians 6:1-5)

Paul packs a lot in these verses. When a person in your life is boundaryless and out of control, Paul tells us to **Restore Gently**. The phrase, "caught in a sin" can mean either secret sins have just been revealed or a brother or sister in Christ is trapped by sin too powerful to stop. In both cases, the response is the same. Notice Paul does not say the rest of the believers should criticize, kick out, condemn or condone the sin. We must "restore him gently." Relationships are like a garden. When weeds are found in a garden, you can violently rip them out but they will come right back. You can spray weed killer on them but you'll destroy the good plants. You can ignore them and let them take over. Or you can gently, patiently uproot them one by one and restore the garden to good health and order. How do you restore someone gently? Wait for them to ask for help. Giving advice, taking control or enabling the behavior are not helpful.

Next: **Respect Boundaries**. Paul warns: "But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). You can't help someone else out of a pit if you are not on firm ground. During a Dominican Republic mission trip we dug many ditches for walls and columns. There were moments, however, when the ditch was so deep and the side walls so fragile it was tricky to get the person out without a collapse. The one above needed to be on firm ground while reaching out a helping hand to the one below. As you attempt to gently restore someone, Paul advises, "watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." One temptation is to fall into the same trap of sin. If someone has a problem with money or alcohol or sex or anger or depression you might start off comforting them and wind up enabling their problem. You could even get so close to the edge the walls collapse and you wind up with them in the pit.

Third: **Resist Judgment.** Instead of offering a helping hand, you may be tempted to stand above, fold your arms and look down on someone in judgment. I like how Bible scholar F.F. Bruce translates Paul's words:

If any one thinks he is something when he is a mere nothing, he is hoodwinking himself. Let each one examine his own work; then he will keep his achievement to himself alone and not compare it with someone else's, for each person will carry his own load (Galatians 6:3-5).<sup>1</sup>

Pride, competition and comparisons are always dangerous in relationships. I read a story that at a Computer Convention, Microsoft's Bill Gates compared the computer industry with the auto industry. "If GM had kept up with technology like the computer industry has, we would all be driving \$25 cars that got 1,000 miles per gallon." Soon after that, General Motors responded to Gates by releasing the statement, "Yes, but would you want your car to crash twice a day?" Comparisons are never helpful.

Most importantly, when it comes to creating healthy boundaries: **Recognize Your Responsibility To Others and For Yourself.** Paul's advice seems contradictory:

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ...for each one should carry his own load. (Galatians 6:5)

How can I carry your burden and carry my own at the same time? The Greek word for *burden* means heaviness, trouble, burdensome. It is too large to carry. The Greek word for *load* refers to a smaller cargo or a daily task. While the first is an enormous burden, the second is a manageable bundle. There are some problems which need the assistance of others. If we attempt to manage them alone we will be crushed. As Christians we are responsible *to* others to help. Yet each of us has tasks and duties which are ours to handle. We are responsible *for* these. Cloud and Townsend conclude:

We are expected to carry our own. We are expected to deal with our own feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as the responsibilities God has given to each one of us, even though it takes effort.

Problems arise when people act as if their "boulders" are daily loads, and refuse help, or as if their "daily loads" are boulders they shouldn't have to carry. The results of these two instances are either perpetual pain or irresponsibility (*Boundaries* p.33)

That was certainly the case with a twenty-five year old man named Bill. His parents came to see Dr. Cloud with a common request: they wanted the doctor to "fix" their son. Bill however didn't think he had a problem. From a very young age Bill was never "quite up to snuff" in their eyes. More recently he had problems with drugs, couldn't stay in school or find a career.

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<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) p. 259.

It was apparent that they loved their son very much and were heartbroken over the way he was living. They had always given him everything he needed. He had plenty of money at school so “he wouldn’t have to work and he would have plenty of time for study and a social life.” When he flunked out of one school, or stopped going to classes, they were more than happy to do everything they could to get him into another school, “where it might be better for him.”

After they had talked for a while, I responded: “I think your son is right. He doesn’t have a problem...you do. He can do pretty much whatever he wants, no problem. You pay, you fret, you worry, you plan, you exert energy to keep him going. He doesn’t have a problem because you have taken it from him. Those things *should* be his problem, but as it now stands, they are yours. *Would you like for me to help you help him to have some problems?*”

As it stands now, he is *irresponsible and happy*, and you are *responsible and miserable*. A little boundary clarification would do the trick. You need some fences to keep his problems out of your yard and in his, where they belong.”

“Isn’t that a bit cruel, just to stop helping like that?” the father asked.

“Has helping him helped?” I asked.

His look told me that he was beginning to understand. (*Boundaries* pp. 29-31)

As you think about the relationship in your life that’s causing you heartache, frustration or pain, ask yourself this question, “Is what you are doing helping?”  
Maybe it’s time to draw a line.