

Maintaining Healthy Boundaries (Part 1)
Romans 14:12

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This morning I want to teach on the subject of boundaries. What are boundaries? Why are they important? What happens when I don't set them? How do I establish healthy boundaries?

I was going to share this in the Monday, Overcomers Outreach because it is so important to staying clean and sober. But setting boundaries is something every one of us struggle with at some level. The health of our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with God, and our relationships with others all depend on this issue of boundaries. Codependency is particularly driven by a lack of healthy boundaries in a relationship. But other addictions are also seriously affected by this. Let me quickly tell you how that happens. When I don't establish healthy boundaries for myself and toward other people, I can feel used; I can feel violated; I can feel disrespected. My emotional state is affected and resentment can come into my heart. Webster's Dictionary defines resentment in this way, "a feeling of indignant displeasure or persistent ill will at something regarded as a wrong, insult, or injury."¹ When that feeling robs us of joy and peace, when those feelings drain the life out of us, then we are particularly tempted to self-medicate with an addictive substance or activity. We try to escape from the feeling by "using" and that only brings temporary relief.² Therefore, one aspect of our healing is learning how to set boundaries that minimize the resentment and pain. Boundaries are important.

Notice that God Himself is a Boundary Setter!

The Bible (reading from the Living Bible) opens with these words from Gen 1:2 "*the earth was a shapeless, chaotic mass...*"³ How do you bring order into a chaotic situation? You establish boundaries! The first boundary God established was on darkness. He divided the light from the darkness. Gen. 1:5 says, "God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night." Then we see Him setting another boundary, this time on the waters. He separated the waters so that we have the firmament and dry land in the earth rather than the oceans flooding over everywhere. He set boundaries on reproduction so that seed produces after its own kind. He establishes seasons; boundaries on the weather. Then He creates man: male and female with boundaries on human sexuality. He placed Adam and Eve in a specific place called "The Garden of Eden" which also had boundaries.⁴ Now follow with me as we read the specific boundary He communicates to them. Gen 2:16-17 "*And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*" Did you notice that the violation of that boundary had a built-in consequence? It's not a threat. God didn't say "If you step over that boundary I will kill you!" He simply let them know that the boundary was a protection from something detrimental, and to overstep it would expose them to something called "death." So in creation we see God bring order where there was chaos and He does it by setting boundaries. I want to suggest that where there is chaos in your life, establishing some boundaries may be a key to bringing order, productivity, and fruitfulness.

¹ Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.) p. 995.

² Of course, this is not a comprehensive statement. The dynamics of addiction are much more complicated. However, this illustrates how the lack of healthy boundaries can feed into the addiction process. Without healthy boundaries on work and stress, a person can find himself desperately grasping for reward and relief from the stress and driven to substance or addictive behavior.

³ All Scripture quotes are from the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ In Gen. 3:23-24 God expelled them from the boundaries of the Garden of Eden.

Throughout Scripture we see God setting boundaries. In Gen. 12 He had told Abram to leave Ur of Chaldees and He gave Abram Canaan land; that would be his inheritance. God set limits on where Abram was to be. When God gave Moses the Law he set limits on specific behavior. The Ten Commandments identify boundaries: “*Thou shalt not...*” When Israel came into the Promise Land God gave each tribe an allotment of land and specifically told them what their boundaries were.⁵ When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples in Matthew 10 He specifically told them who to preach to, what to preach, and how they were to conduct themselves. He set boundaries on all those things. When Jesus was ready to ascend into heaven after His resurrection, He told His followers to “*Tarry in ... Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high*” (Luke 24:49). Boundaries are a good and necessary thing. God sets boundaries.

The most amazing thing to me is that God even sets boundaries on Himself! People argue over whether God is sovereign or man has freewill. Which is it? It is both! In His sovereignty, God has chosen to give man freewill. He has the power to not grant that and He has the power to grant it. In His place of infinite power God has chosen to grant freewill to people. This is illustrated in 2 Peter 3:9 “*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*” God desires that all come to repentance and be saved. In His omnipotence, He could force that on everyone. But He sets a limit on His own use of power, so that everyone’s freewill is respected. I have the power to cheat on my income tax. But I have decided not to do that. Out of integrity every year I honor that limit I have set on my behavior. Out of integrity God continues to honor the decision He has sovereignly made to respect the freewill He has given man.

Setting limits and establishing boundaries is something God does in Himself and toward others. It is something we must do if we are to enjoy life to its full.

I. We must set boundaries on ourselves.

We must learn the art of self-discipline.

In our study of Romans we came to understand that self-control is not something we can master on our own without God. The struggle Paul reports in Romans 7 validates that. Jesus said, “*Without Me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). The first step to addiction recovery says, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol- that our lives had become unmanageable.” What a sad state we would be in if it all ended there. But step two says, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”⁶ We are not saying that we can set boundaries on ourselves without God’s grace. But there is a God in heaven who loves us. He sends the Holy Spirit in our lives to empower us.⁷ And one fruit of His influence (one evidence of His operation) is something called “*self-control.*” The KJV calls it temperance. Gal 5:22-23 “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control....*” Self-Control is the ability to draw boundaries on my own behavior. Can I say “no” to myself? Am I willing to do that? This is where we must first learn to draw boundaries.

⁵ See Joshua 13-19.

⁶ Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.) p. 5.

⁷ Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 3:20; 6:10.

That means that we learn to manage our own emotions in a way that doesn't damage other people. Eph. 4:26-27 says, "*Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, 27 nor give place to the devil.*" Anger is an emotion we all experience. When we feel threatened or violated the emotion of anger is a natural response. There is no sin in feeling angry. However, we are responsible for how we manage that anger. If we lash out at the other person, there will be certain consequences that result. When you feel anger, the exhortation is "*do not sin.*" There is an old, outdated axiom in psychology that says you must vent that anger, get it out; it's like steam building up in a tea pot; blow off the steam and you'll feel better. It will damage you if you don't do that. Professionals know better than that now.⁸ The anger needs to be acknowledged. It needs to be expressed in a healthy way. But it does nobody any good for you to dump the emotion on somebody else. And it certainly won't do your relationship any good. "*...do not let the sun go down on your wrath.*" Don't brood over the offense. Don't roll it over and over in your mind. Don't let it brew into a bed of resentment. Don't give place to the devil in that way. I remember going to the home of a couple in our church years ago who were complaining that they didn't have friends. After a brief talk, the wife began to emotionally dump on me. She unleashed a barrage of anger and resentment for about an hour. At the end I felt like I had been scratched, kicked, elbowed, gouged, and beaten to a pulp. I'm thinking, "Lady, I can tell you why you have no friends." Of course, I didn't say that; but probably should have. I should have drawn a boundary after a few minutes of that and told the woman I was there to help her but she was not free to dump her emotional garbage in my yard. Most of her resentment was toward her husband whom she felt was not meeting her needs. He wisely kept low and said very little during the whole encounter. We don't have to let people dump on us like that. In reality, it doesn't help them and it damages us.

We set boundaries on our own behavior so that we live according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh. We obey the boundaries God has given us in His word. We manage our thought life. We establish healthy patterns of living. We say no to those behaviors that are self-destructive.

The addiction cycle begins in thought life.⁹



⁸ C. Tavris 1989. *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion* (1982 reprint) (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1989) as quoted by Joyce Hocker and William Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014) pp. 201-201.

⁹ Image obtained at

<https://www.google.com/search?q=addiction+cycle&biw=1366&bih=643&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=0CCUQsARqFQoTCOHgiYDZhcYCFUkirAod4IsAKA&dpr=1> accessed 6-5-15.

In our study of Romans we talked about the importance of managing our thought life.¹⁰ When our thoughts gravitate toward the need for a drink we begin to fanaticize and justify the need. The impaired thinking sets us up. Then we go into ritual behaviors.¹¹ Part of the recovery process is to identify the ritual behaviors associated with the addiction so that we can stop the process rather than waiting until we're at the acting-out stage.¹² An alcoholic's ritual might go something like this. I am really feeling stressed. I need to relax this evening. I think I'll go to Kum N Go and get some cigarettes. At the store I then walk down the liquor isle while browsing through the store. As I walk around, I wander back to the liquor isle and pick up a six pack; then go to the counter and ask for the cigarettes. I tell myself I'm only going to have one or two as I sit down in my easy chair and light up a cigarette. When the six pack is gone, I go to the store and get another one. It's amazing how an addict can go through a ritual like that and each time tell himself he's only going to have one or two.

So how does this relate to boundaries? Instead of waiting until I get to the store to try resisting temptation, I see the ritual developing and take action early in the process. When the thought hits my mind to go to Kum N Go, I call my sponsor and ask for prayer. I set a boundary that my wife will do the shopping for cigarettes or whatever might be needed. I never walk down the liquor isle, because I never go to get the cigarettes. I set a boundary on myself that other people may not have, but I know I need it.

I don't want to spend too much time on setting boundaries for ourselves because that is not my primary focus in this message. However, we cannot expect to have the ability to set boundaries toward other people, if we won't do it on ourselves. So let me mention a couple of other areas of boundaries we must set for ourselves.

We must recognize and accept our own human limitations. We can drive ourselves to self-loathing by setting unrealistic standards for ourselves. Some parents instill this in their kids while they're growing up. Nothing is ever good enough. You made a B in the class, but I really wish you had made an A. If you had practiced more, you would have made that shot during the basketball game. Setting high goals is one thing; setting unrealistic goals is something else. Unrealistic goals leave us feeling yucky about ourselves and looking for some substance, some high to bring escape from all that.

In Rom 12:6-7 Paul writes, "*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; 7 or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching.*" I don't have to preach as well as Billy Graham. All I have to do is diligently do what I can do. I don't have to measure up to somebody else; I just have to be the best that I can be. I will be happiest when I can trust God's wisdom in how He made me and get comfortable in my own skin. It's doesn't mean I stop pursuing excellence; but it does mean I stop living in competition¹³ with somebody else or with an

¹⁰ Romans 8:1-8.

¹¹ For a definition of ritual in the way I am using it here see Elizabeth Hartney, PhD at <http://addictions.about.com/od/sexaddiction/g/defritual.htm> accessed 6-5-15. Sometimes the word ritual is used to refer to a stage in the development of addiction.

¹² In his book, *Pure Desire* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1999) Ted Roberts writes, "The addictive ritual eases that tension, but once the person is involved in a ritual, the choice has already been made—it's only a matter of time" (p. 103 and see charts on pp. 50 and 127).

¹³ 2Cor. 10:12-13. In Matt. 25:14-30 not every steward was given the same amount of talents; but each only gave account for the talents entrusted to him. Rom. 14:12 must be kept in mind throughout this teaching.

impossible expectation. There are some things I can do and there are some things I'm not designed to do. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."¹⁴

There are ways I can make a difference. I need to see those possibilities. Noble, realistic, healthy pursuits give me the motivation needed for a disciplined life. It's hard to have discipline if we see no benefits in the process. But when we see a goal worthy of self-sacrifice, then we can set the boundaries on how we use our time, how we spend our money, how we will invest our energy in order to reach those goals.

My text this morning is this simple verse in Rom 14:12 "*So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.*" Paul followed up that verse with these words, "*Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore....*"

Another boundary we place on ourselves is in the area of judging. Judging is God's realm of authority.¹⁵ When we set ourselves up to pass judgement on others, we are stepping into a realm that does not belong to us. We have to be discerning. We have to be aware of where people are going with their lives so that we don't follow the wrong thing.¹⁶ But we also know that we never have all the facts. We are never in a position to pass final judgment on somebody else. And when we take the role of judge we are probably operating in pride. In that mode we can easily take on a critical spirit. It would take a whole sermon to explain this adequately; but we need to be careful about a judgmental attitude because when we have that, we have probably crossed an important boundary.

"So then each of us shall give account of himself to God."

Notice what you will not give an account for. You will not give account for my stewardship. In the Parable of the Talents, the man with five talents did not have to give account for what the man with one talent did. Each man gave an account for himself. We don't have time to go into all the qualification that might be made to this statement. A parent has certain accountability for their children. A pastor has certain accountability for his flock. But as a broad statement, we are ultimately only responsible for what we do—not what others around us do. We can really get into trouble when we don't honor that boundary. It's not my job, even as a pastor, to control your behavior. I can speak truth from this pulpit, I must set a godly example—but you have the God-given right to decide what you will do with your life. When we become controlling of others, we are not respecting their boundaries. There are basically two kinds of controllers. One is the aggressive person who simply powers over others—imposing their will regardless of what other people may need or think. The other is the manipulator who does the same thing but in more subtle ways. Both are violating boundaries.¹⁷ "*So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.*"

I'm amazed at the controlling, manipulating people who are baffled as to why others don't want to be with them. They seem to be oblivious to what they're doing to other people. They can't figure out why they don't have any friends. When you control and violate the personal boundaries of other people, some will stand up and fight you, some will succumb and serve you,

¹⁴ Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Matt. 7:1-5; Rom. 14:10-13.

¹⁶ Matt. 10:16; 23:1-3; 2Thes. 3:6-9.

¹⁷ Deut. 27:17 says, "*Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's landmark.*" *"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'*

In this case, violating a legitimate boundary brought a curse on the violator.

but most will simply get away from you. So, healthy relationships first require us to set boundaries on our own behavior, especially our behavior toward others.

II. Then we also set boundaries toward other people.

We don't set boundaries for them; they are the ones that do that. But we set boundaries on how they will interact with us.

We do not have time to address the second half of this message today. So we will continue next week with part two of this passage.