

Maintaining Healthy Boundaries (Part 2)

Romans 14:12

Richard Tow 6-14-15

“God has a wonderful plan for your life, *and* so does everybody else.” That’s the problem we will address today. If you allow others to impose their plan on you, there is a very real danger you will not fulfill God’s plan for you.¹ Maintaining healthy boundaries in our relationships with other people: that is our subject this morning. Last week we moved toward that with a discussion about setting boundaries on our own behavior. We talked about self-discipline; we talked about managing our own emotions in a way that does no harm to others; we talked about respecting other people’s boundaries—not manipulating or controlling other people in our lives. If we won’t respect the boundaries others set toward us, it’s unrealistic and unfair to think they will respect the boundaries we set toward them. We addressed self-discipline because that significantly affects our ability to set firm boundaries toward others.

Our subject is vast and we will deal with it in a very limited time. Therefore, this message will be far from comprehensive. However, I would like to make a few observations about setting healthy boundaries in our relationships with other people.

(1) Boundaries are about asserting responsibility for our own behavior.

When we talk about setting boundaries toward other people, we are not saying that we set their boundaries on *their* behavior. Ultimately they must do that themselves. We are really saying that we set boundaries on what we will accept into the relationship. We make our own choices about what *we will do* about the specific behavior the other persons exercises.² For example, let’s say XYZ Company hires me to work 40 hours per week as an accountant for a salary of \$ 600 a week. Six months down the road, I notice that I am only being paid \$ 400 per week. So I go to my boss and point out the mistake. But he assures me there is no mistake. The company has been going through some tough financial times and has decided to pay me \$ 400 per week instead of \$ 600. To simplify the illustration and to keep us from going on a tangent, assume with me there is no term employment contract and no legal action that I can take.³ So I work another week and the paycheck is still \$ 400 per week. I go to my boss again and explain my own financial situation and tell him that I need him to continue paying me the \$ 600 per week. He says he can’t and won’t do that. Now I have to set a boundary in the relationship. How is that done? Do I make him pay me \$ 600 per week? How would I do that? Would I yell at him? Probably wouldn’t make any positive difference. Do I take a gun and make him pay me the other \$ 200; would probably just get myself in trouble with the law. What happens when I try to control *his* behavior? Probably a whole lot of negative things happen. He can decide that he will only pay his accountant \$ 400 a week. But I can decide what I am going to do about “me”,

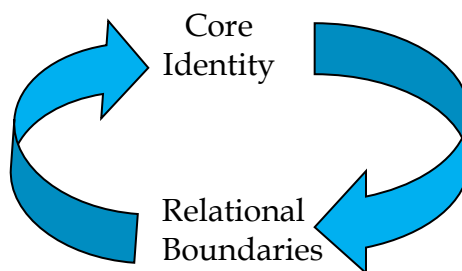
¹ Gal. 1:10; John 6:15; Matt. 16:23.

² The nomenclature that divides part 1 and part 2 of these messages is artificial and may even be misleading. In reality, whether I am talking about setting boundaries on my eating habits or setting boundaries on what I will accept in a relationship, it is all done by *my* decisions about what *I will do*.

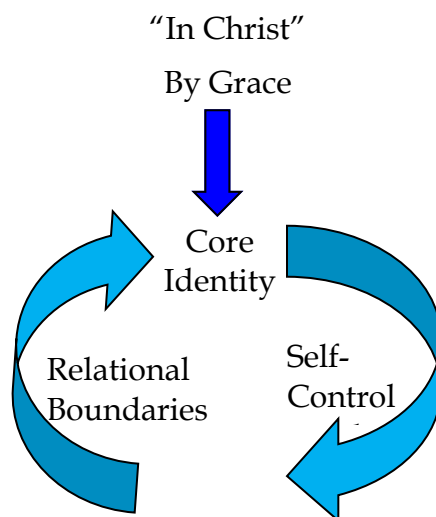
³ There are many qualifiers to the general principle I am presenting in this message. To mention those would entail so much detail that the central message would probably be lost. In this complex world of relationships, there are authority structures that modify the general principle in a given situation. Later I speak of parents setting boundaries for children. In such cases the autonomy of the other person is invaded more than usual because of the responsibility Scripture ascribes to a parent. Similarly a prison warden would assert extraordinary control over prisoners because of the responsibility society has given him. I have avoided all those lengthy discussions so that the fundamental principal of accountability for self is understood. If I were to teach students about dealing with gravity I would first make sure Newton’s Law was comprehended before talking about the principles of aerodynamics, jet propulsion, and other factors that might affect the activity of the basic law of gravity.

given his choice. I could start looking for another job and continuing working for \$ 400 until I find it. I could quit on the spot. I could suggest a new arrangement in which I work only three days a week instead of five for the \$ 400 pay. Bottom line is this. He can decide what he is going to do; but I will decide for myself what I'm going to do. The boundary that I draw is about what is acceptable for me in the relationship. If it is acceptable to both parties for me to work three days a week for \$ 400, then the relationship may continue on new terms acceptable to both parties. If his line is \$ 400 per week for five days work, I may not see much of him from that day forward. I may go work for someone else. *I don't have to simply accept his new terms* for the relationship. I set boundaries on what is acceptable to me and I decide what I will do based on that. I don't solve the problem by trying to control his behavior. I solve the problem by deciding what I will do. The consequence of his decision may be that I am no longer doing accounting work for him. The key principle is this: I have authority to make decisions about what I will do and I will make those decisions of my own freewill. I will not try to control or manipulate you; I may reason with you and try to find mutually acceptable terms of our relationship. But I will not try to control you and I will not allow you to control me.

(2) Our ability to set healthy relational boundaries flows out of own self-respect and personal identity. I need a core sense of dignity that is projected in my interaction with other people. Conversely maintaining healthy boundaries reinforces that core self-respect. Here is a simple graph that might communicate that more clearly.



So the stronger my core sense of identity and self-respect, the easier it will be to establish healthy boundaries in relationships. And as I establish healthy, respectful boundaries my sense of self-worth will be nurtured and strengthened. Now let me expand this graph.



Healthy boundary setting begins with the grace of God and your revelation of who you are in Christ. Paul said "...by the grace of God I am what I am..." (1 Cor. 15:10).⁴ Eph. 2:8 "For by

⁴ Scripture quotes are in the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God....”

Your core identity has to come out a revelation of who God has made you to be in your innermost being by His grace. We don't have time to deal with that this morning; but we certainly cannot overlook it because it is the beginning point of everything.⁵ The influence of the Holy Spirit enables us to produce the fruit of the Spirit which includes self-control.

Now this is why I had to begin last week with boundaries we set on ourselves in terms of self-discipline. The more I understand who I am in Christ, the more I am motivated to live accordingly. The more I live consistent with my values, the more affirmed I feel in my identity. The identity is there by a gift of God; but my level of confidence depends on my living in accordance with the value system God has put in my heart. This is why John wrote, *“For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God”* (1 John 3:20-22). The Devil is always tempting you to violate your own conscience and then condemning you for the sin—because that undermines your confidence. So obedience to God gives us solid footing for enforcing relational boundaries. Let me just pause and say, “None of us do this perfectly.” That's why Jesus taught us to pray daily, *“And forgive us our sins for we also forgive”* (Luke 11:3-4).

So living in self-control, living consistent with our inner values, strengthens our fortitude to set healthy boundaries. Then the relationships that come out of setting healthy boundaries affirms our sense of self-respect and that strengthens our resolve to live honorable lives. There is an important complementary relationship between self-esteem or self-identity, the discipline of living consistent with our values, and the maintaining of healthy boundaries in our relationships.

Boundaries provide space and autonomy.

Boundaries define what is me and what is not me; what is mine and what is yours.

(3) Boundaries let me know what I am responsible for and what I am not responsible for.⁶

I am finite. I cannot be responsible for everything. I cannot be responsible for things that I have no decision-making authority over. So the text must be kept in mind. Rom. 14:12 *“So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.”*⁷

For my relationships to be healthy I must thoroughly understand this basic principle. I am responsible for me and my choices, not you and your choices. You are responsible for you and your choices, and I am not responsible for you and your choices. So in any given situation, what I have to do is *make sure I do what is right!* If I try to make *you* do what is right, I have crossed a crucial boundary. If I try to control your behavior, I will fail because it's outside my realm of authority.

Are there any rescuers in the house? Some of us are by nature rescuers. We will find ourselves trying to fix people if we're not careful. And the whole time we're trying to help them, they are resenting us. Why, because we are violating their dignity and God-given autonomy. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father did not try to fix his son. He reasoned with him; he loved him and was available to receive him; he never rejected him. But he did not follow him to the pig pen and try to drag him out. He let him wallow in it until he got sick and tired of it and ready to change. When the younger son repented and returned to his father, the elder son got

⁵ See my message preached Feb. 15, 2015 entitled “Embracing Your New Identity” for more on this subject.

⁶ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to say yes and when to say no to take control of your life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) p. 29. The influence of this book and other teachings by these men has probably affected this lesson in more ways that I realize. I read *Boundaries* several years ago and personally think it is the most helpful book available on the subject.

⁷ We can see this principle at work in the Parable of the Talents. The steward with five talents did not give account for the one talent another man had and vice versa (Matt. 25:14-30).

angry that the father was throwing a party in celebration. The elder son sat outside pouting.⁸ Again the father reasoned with the elder son, he explained what he was doing, he encouraged the son to enjoy the party. The elder son's pouting did not control him. The father did not cancel the party because the elder son was upset. It was right to celebrate. The elder son could pout if he chose to, that was his choice as to what he would do. But as for the father, the party goes on.

In John 5 when Jesus approached the crippled man at the Pool of Bethesda, before he did anything for the man He asked him this question, "*Do you want to be made well?*" On the surface, that sounds like a mighty strange question to ask. The man is lying here waiting for the waters to be troubled so he can be made well—or so it would seem. But Jesus is respecting the individual's boundaries. If you don't open the gate to me, I will not crash through your fence. If you want me to make you well, then I will. But if you don't want to get well, I will not try to fix you.

In Rev. 3:20 Jesus says to the Church at Laodicea, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*" Think for a moment who this is standing at the door and knocking. This is Jesus, the Head of the Church. With one word He could knock the door down. But He respects the individual boundary. He patiently stands and knocks, waiting for the door to be opened from the inside.

(4) Boundaries maintain mutually acceptable levels of interdependence and intimacy.

For relationships to be healthy, both parties must be free to make their own choices. Both parties need to feel respected. Both parties need to feel the relationship is mutually beneficial.

I was in a relationship with another party in ministry. When the relationship began the interdependence was mutually beneficial and everyone was happy. But as time went on he began to slowly manipulate the situation, taking more and more authority and excusing himself more and more from responsibility. When I confronted the problem, I soon discovered that he did not know how to collaborate on a mutually acceptable solution. Instead the stance became even more controlling. So what should I do in that situation? Should I fight him and try to make him do the right thing? What I could do is simply make my own choices about what I would do, and let him make their choices about what they would do. The level of interdependence was no longer acceptable to me. Sometimes the only solution to a toxic relationship is to reduce the level of interdependence to an acceptable level.⁹ We do not have to be angry to do that. We just have to be intentional. Abraham found himself in a situation where the interdependence between him and Lot was no longer working. Abraham set a boundary that resolved the conflict. Gen 13:8-9 "*So Abram said to Lot, 'Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. 9 Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left.'*" You never hear of strife between the two again.¹⁰

Imaging my neighbor and I have no fence between our yards. We mutually decide that we will share the yards together. When he gets time, he will mow all of it. And when I get the

⁸ King Ahab manipulated through pouting (1 Kings 21:4) and Queen Jezebel controlled through dominance (1 Kings 21:7-16). Both showed little respect for boundaries, even killing Naboth to expand their own garden.

⁹ Henry Cloud writes, "We cannot stop someone from being abusive; but we can stop exposing ourselves or our kids to the abuse." *Changes that Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) p. 142.

¹⁰ Notice, Abraham initiated this reduction of interdependence. He is gracious in the way he goes about it, even giving Lot his choice of direction. Managing interdependence levels helps us be flexible and preserve relationships. When we think in extreme black and white terms, we tend to completely reject a relationship rather than adjust it appropriately. Abraham did not reject Lot, he simply did the prudent thing to do. Later when Lot got into trouble, it was Abraham who came to his aid (Gen. 14:13-16).

opportunity, I will mow all of it. At first it works well. About half the time he is mowing and half the time I am mowing. But as time goes by, he generates a lot of good excuses why he can't mow. It slowly gets where I'm mowing about 80% of the time. Additionally, he feels free to let his three dogs pop on the grass without picking it up. Now he is happy with the relationship, but I am getting less and less satisfied with the arrangement. I try to raise the issue, but he insists that things must stay as they are. What should I do? Do I manhandle him and make him mow? No, I simply reduce the level of interdependence by building a fence between us.¹¹ He can let the dog pop accumulate on his side if he wants to. He can never mow as far as I'm concerned. I'll keep my yard mowed and hold no animosity against him. When someone is dysfunctional, we have to establish boundaries so that their dysfunction causes consequence for them, not us.

Boundaries are like fences and walls. They keep things out that we don't want in. Fences have gates and walls have doors so that we can open up and let others into our lives. But we can close the gate or we can open the gate. Some people lock the gate and keep everyone out.¹² That may at first seem safe, but it leaves us lonely and unfulfilled, because we were designed for relationship. We need relationships to fully experience who we are. What we must learn how to do is to keep out toxic relationships, and open the gate to healthy one. I remind you of what has already been said. A healthy relationship goes both ways. If we want people to respect our boundaries, we must be willing to respect their boundaries. If we don't want people dumping their emotional garbage in our yard, we must not dump ours in their yard.

(5) Boundaries should be modeled by parents and learned by children in the home.

Unfortunately, that model is often distorted. An extreme case of boundary violation would be incest; but there are many ways in which the model can be distorted. Some parents give no respect to the child's autonomy. The child is dominated and disrespected, told what to do and his opinion counts for nothing. Other parents give no boundaries to a kid. The child is a loose cannon walking over others with no regard for them. When he comes to your house he climbs all over your furniture, opens the kitchen cabinets and takes what he pleases. He doesn't distinguish between what is yours and what is his. That behavior is ok for a two-year old, but I've seen kids ten or twelve years old behave like that. It's not that the cookies in the cabinet matter. It's that he is growing up with no respect toward other people's boundaries.

(6) Boundaries have to be communicated and enforced to be effective.

A parent who tells the three year old not to get into the cookie jar and enforces the boundary is teaching that child something he will benefit from the rest of his life. Later when he is working with his employer's money he will understand that there is a difference between his own money and the money in the cookie jar. The parent who tells a kid to not cross a line and then does nothing about it when the kid violates the boundary is setting that kid up for a lot of problems in later life.

Will people get upset when we establish boundaries? Yes, and especially if you didn't communicate boundaries earlier in the relationship. Some will lash out at you in anger. Some will attack you. Some will speak evil of you. Some will put a guilt trip on you. Some will pout. If any of that manipulation works, then your boundary crumbles. You have to kindly, yet firmly maintain the boundary that you have set. They can do whatever they want to. You will continue

¹¹ Assuming I attempted to resolve the problem through a forthright conversation about the problem and that was not successful.

¹² Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries*, pp. 31-32. On pp. 96-97 of *Changes that Heal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) Henry Cloud talks illustrates boundaries by using the analogy of the human body. Our skin protects vital organs and the flow of blood but keeps out contaminating elements.

to do what you have decided to do. Make sure it is just and right; but once you know that, then don't waver.

Boundaries mostly get communicated non-verbally. Body language, the way you carry yourself, the way you look the other person in the eye, the disapproving look you give when somebody speaks inappropriately. There are 1,001 ways you are communicating boundaries.

Sometimes the boundaries have to be stated explicitly. When that is necessary it is good to know how to have a firm, calm confronting conversation that is both respectful toward the other person, yet clear as to where the boundary is at. Healthy people will respect your boundaries. They will communicate their boundaries to you as needed. Unhealthy people trample into other people's gardens and have to be ordered out. Dysfunctional people may have no sense of justice and will take and take from you and never give back.

(7) Boundaries are not inconsistent with Christian values of personal sacrifice and service.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "*And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away*" Matt 5:41-42. Is He saying, "Have no boundaries?" No, as a general statement He is saying to be benevolent; give to other people rather than being selfish. But Scripture as a whole teaches us to set healthy boundaries. In 2 Thes. 3:10 Paul told the early church to set a boundary. If someone in the church would not work, then let him feel the consequence of that. Don't feed him. Let him get hungry enough to get up off his bottom and put his hand to the plow. Jesus Himself set boundaries with people. When the people wanted to make Him king (John 6:15) he withdrew Himself from them. When Peter told Jesus He must not go to the cross, Jesus rebuked him and firmly set a boundary (Matt. 16:22-23).

The difference between Christian sacrificial virtue and codependency has to do more with the inner motivation than the external behavior. I may choose to give my cloak as well as my coat. I may turn the other cheek and not defend myself. I may go the second mile when one should have been sufficient. But I do it because I have decided that it is the most effective way to deal with the situation. I am not doing it because I fear rejection. I am not doing it out of severe need for approval. Jesus washed the disciples feet, even Judas' feet, not because He was trying to get those guys to like Him, but because He wanted to teach them the value of humble service. He did it because His internal compass from the Father pointed Him in that direction. He did always those things that pleased the Father.¹³ Paul wrote in Gal 1:10 "*Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ*" (NIV).

Is it ok to say "no" to an authority? Yes, at times that needs to be done. It needs to be done respectfully, but all human authority is limited in its scope and power. There is a limit to what a husband can require of a wife. There is a limit to what a political government can require of its citizens. When told to stop preaching Jesus, Peter told his government, "*We must obey God rather than man*" (Acts 5:29). There is a limit on what spiritual authorities can require of people. Even when the early church was selling personal property and giving it to the church, Peter clearly said that was their free choice. No one was required to do that (Acts 4:34-35; 5:4). We need to respect and honor authority. God will not bless a rebellious spirit. But all human authority has limits and must respect certain boundaries.

So, how do we establish healthy boundaries?

This provides a quick summary of what we have said.

(1) We begin by establishing appropriate boundaries on our own behavior in terms of self-

¹³ John 8:29. This discussion of Christian service and sacrifice needs to be much more extensive; but, hopefully, the essential idea is there.

discipline.

(2) We respect the boundaries others set for our interaction with them. We do not manipulate or try to control them. They are free to make their own choices.

(3) We determine what are the right and healthy boundaries for us in each of our relationships. Some people are healthy enough that we can have intimate and highly interdependent relationships. Some toxic people must be kept at more distance for our own wellbeing. We draw relational lines that keep the interaction mutually beneficial or at least not detrimental to us.¹⁴ Boundaries can be communicated in subtle ways. When you begin a relationship start cautiously and let the trust grow.¹⁵ People who have trouble with boundaries are sometimes so hungry for personal relationships that they open up too quickly, they offer more than they can deliver; then it is challenging for them to tighten the boundaries. Nevertheless, that can be done and should be done if necessary.

(4) We graciously share what we can with others while maintaining our own health at the same time. When the Good Samaritan saw a man in desperate need, he extended help to the man. But he also limited that help to what he could appropriately give. He got the man food, lodging, and medical help. But at the same time, he went on to finish the trip that he was making.¹⁶ Peter said to the man at the Gate Beautiful, “*Such as I have give I unto you.*”¹⁷ After 40 years of ministry, I have learned that sometimes I have to let somebody else do it or I’m not going to survive. In some cases, I have to tell people, “I wish I could do more, but there are other people I’m trying to help as well.” Boundaries are not an excuse for living selfishly; but they are a way to stay healthy while we give of ourselves to others. They are a way for people to be made to experience their own consequences and learn from their own mistakes.

(5) We invest the effort necessary for maintaining healthy boundaries. It requires some courage; it requires some straight talk (speaking the truth in love);¹⁸ it requires perseverance. Sometimes we need support and help in the process. This is why codependents need a recovery program just as much as addicts do. Sometimes it can be very helpful to have a sponsor or coach or counselor help us learn the skills and principles of maintaining healthy relationships.

The Payoff is big. In time we discover a clearer sense of self-identity and self-esteem. We shake off the resentment of feeling used and abused. We reduce the pressure to find escape in a substance or addictive activity. We’re not afraid of relationships because we know how to limit them in a healthy way. We become more enjoyable to be with; and we enjoy being with others more.

Prayer for Healthy Relationships

¹⁴ While building facilities for a church, I saw the importance of building boundaries into the structure rather than trying to intimidate people into respecting boundaries. If there is an area where access should be restricted, put a lock on the door rather than yelling at people for going where they should not go. Make it natural for them to honor the boundary. Structure relationships where boundaries are a natural part of the interaction.

¹⁵ Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves: Matt. 10:16.

¹⁶ Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries*, pp. 38-39 enlarges upon this in a vivid way.

¹⁷ Acts 3:6. Often the specific thing someone is asking of us (or perhaps even demanding) is not what they really need. We also have limits on what we have available to give to that person and still manage our own wellbeing and help others who may be in need.

¹⁸ Eph. 4:15

OUTLINE

Maintaining Healthy Boundaries (Part II)

Romans 14:12 “So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.”

Intro

Last week:

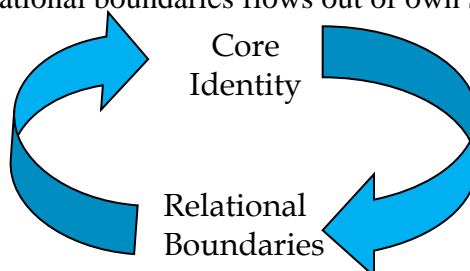
I. We Must Set Boundaries on Ourselves

This week:

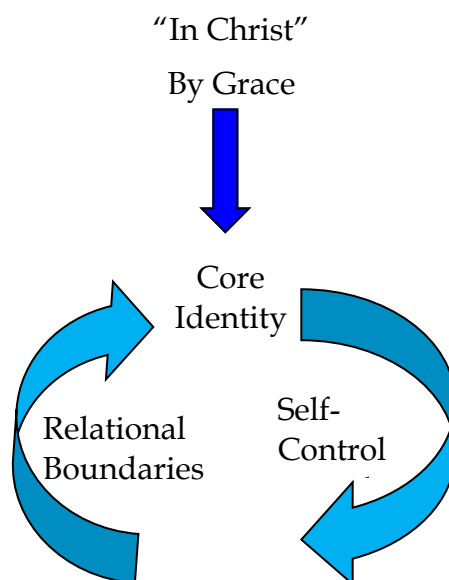
II. We Must Set Boundaries on toward Other People

7 OBSERVATIONS

- (1) Boundaries are about asserting responsibility for our *own* behavior.
- (2) Our ability to set healthy relational boundaries flows out of own self-respect & core identity.



Healthy boundary setting begins with the grace of God & your revelation of who you are in Christ.



- (3) Boundaries let me know what I am responsible for and what I am not responsible for.

Rom. 14:12 “So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.”

Basic Principle: I am responsible for me and my choices (not you and your choices). You are responsible for you & your choices, & I am not responsible for you & your choices.

- Parable of Prodigal Son
- John 5 “Do you want to be made well?”
- Rev. 3:20 “Behold, I stand at the door and knock....”

- (4) Boundaries maintain mutually acceptable levels of interdependence and intimacy.
Gen 13:8-9 “*So Abram said to Lot....*”
Boundaries are like fences and walls. They keep things out that we don’t want in.
- (5) Boundaries should be modeled by parents and learned by children in the home.
- (6) Boundaries have to be communicated and enforced to be effective.
Will people get upset when we establish boundaries?
Boundaries mostly get communicated non-verbally—but sometimes must be stated explicitly.
- (7) Boundaries are not inconsistent with Christian values of personal sacrifice and service.
Matt. 5:41-42 2 Thes. 3:10 John 6:15 Matt. 16:22-23

How to Maintain Healthy Relationships

1. Establish Boundaries on our Own Behavior
2. Respect Boundaries others Set for their Lives
3. Determine Appropriate Boundary for Each Relationship and Communicate it.
4. Graciously Give to Others While Maintaining Your Own Health
5. Persevere in the Process (Get Help When Needed)

Conclusion: The Payoff

1. Clearer self-identity and self-esteem
2. Reduced resentment and pressure to find escape through substance or addictive activity
3. Joy of Healthy Relationships

Questions

1. Do you feel your family of origin was a good model for healthy boundaries?
Why or why not?

2. How does setting boundaries on our own behavior enable us to set boundaries on our interaction with others? How does it equip us to do it? How does it communicate self-respect for the processes of requiring respect from others?

3. Discuss the relationship between self-identity (in Christ), living consistent with your inner values, and setting healthy relational boundaries.

4. What is your understanding of the Key Principle: I am responsible for me & my choices (not yours). You are responsible for you & your choices (not mine).

5. Why must we structure relationships so that others experience the consequence of their own dysfunctional behavior? In what ways does a codependent person fail to do this?

6. Why must the level of interdependence be and remain mutually acceptable to both parties?

7. Discuss the five statements of How to Maintain Healthy Relationships.