

## ***Understanding Boundaries***

by Chris Garner

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. ~ Proverbs 4:23*

### ***What are Boundaries?***

Simply stated, a boundary is a limit or edge. A fence marking a property line is a boundary. Walls, hedges or signs also serve as physical boundaries as they mark property that belongs to a person. There are privileges and responsibilities that go with owning the property within a boundary. This is standard and accepted in society today.

There are also personal boundaries that differentiate people from one another. Skin is a boundary line; it defines where one physically begins and ends as a person. Personal boundaries also extend beyond the skin to the space around a person. One may physically back away from another when he feels the other person is too close and crowding his space.

Many people are not aware of how much these personal boundaries affect their lives. In addition to defining a person physically, boundaries define people emotionally, spiritually and intellectually. They define who a person is and also what does or does not belong to him. Feelings, attitudes and reactions to events and people fall within a person's boundaries. People respond to their environment based on who they are and where they came from. Attempted invasion of a person's boundaries or having boundaries that do not protect a person can both have negative affects in a person's life. Healthy, protective boundaries are not the standard today.

Personal boundaries are not as acceptable in society as property boundaries. Most people are not taught about boundaries as children, and they are often taught that their boundaries are not important. Many children are forced to kiss and hug people they do not want to kiss and hug. They are told to do things simply because a parent or an adult says to do them. Appropriate boundaries are not set in relationships, and many people continue through life with a distorted view of personal boundaries in their lives.

### ***God and Boundaries***

The concept of boundaries is not a man-made idea; it comes from God Himself. God differentiates Himself from angels and mankind. In the Bible, God defines Himself and takes ownership and responsibility for what is His. He tells others what He feels and thinks and lets His likes and dislikes be known. There are things God allows and things He does not allow.

*"Having an awareness of boundaries and limits helps me discover who I am. Until I know who I am, it will be difficult for me to have healthy relationships, whether they may be casual acquaintances, friends, close relationships or intimate relationships." ~ Charles Whitfield*

God introduces boundaries to mankind in the Book of Genesis when He told Adam that he could eat of any tree, but not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said that if Adam ate of that tree he would die. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they brought death into the world. God set the boundary; man violated the boundary and then had to endure the consequences.

Examples of God's boundaries can be seen throughout the Bible (as well as the fact that He does not violate man's boundaries). Jesus stands at the door of the heart and knocks, but He does not enter unless each person opens the door (Revelation 3:20). God does not force people to obey His commands; He allows them the choice. Adam and Eve made their own choices to disobey and eat the fruit. Every person has the choice to live life God's way or their own way.

### ***Taking Responsibility***

The concept of boundaries means that each person takes responsibility for the areas of his life that belongs to him. These areas include:

- Actions
- Behaviors
- Choices
- Decisions
- Sexuality
- Attitudes
- Beliefs
- Emotions
- Desires
- Feelings
- Love
- Needs
- Reactions
- Spirituality
- Talents
- Thoughts
- Values

Throughout history people have blamed others for problems that belong within their own boundaries. This is seen in the story of the fall. God confronted Adam, and he blamed the woman God had given him. Then, Eve blamed the serpent. People must quit blaming others for their problems, sin and failures and take responsibility for that which belongs to them. Yes, there may be times when someone may violate your boundaries. You cannot change the wrong done, but you are responsible for how you proceed from that point.

A person is not responsible for the abuse he may have received as a child, but he must take responsibility for his behavior as an adult and not blame present poor behavior on the evil done to him years before. A husband may wrong his wife in some way, treating her disrespectfully or in a demeaning way. His behavior is wrong, but she must take responsibility for her response and not blame her husband if she responds in anger or by attempting to return the hurt.

## ***Boundaries & Relationship***

Understanding boundaries is important to healthy relationships. Relationships occur at the point where people have contact with other people, at their boundaries. Without an understanding of boundaries, people will find relationships difficult and often unhealthy. Once healthy boundaries are built, relationships will have the opportunity to grow stronger and healthier.

Very often boundaries are used inappropriately. A husband will put up with a nagging, criticizing wife for years and then set a boundary and leave her. Or a wife may put up with an abusive or immoral husband and finally set a boundary and throw him out of the house. The purpose of boundaries is to take ownership and responsibility for self, not to change others or end unhealthy relationships.

***Do everything in love. ~ 1 Corinthians 16:14***

The foundation of boundaries is love. Love of God, self and others motivates people to set healthy boundaries. God has boundaries with His people because He loves them. He will not violate their boundaries, but expects that they will not violate His. It is not unreasonable to expect a spouse, children or others to respect your boundaries as you respect theirs. With healthy boundaries people have the freedom to love others as God created them and respect their differences. It becomes what Drs. Cloud and Townsend call the *Triangle of Boundaries*.<sup>2</sup> People take responsibility for their own freedom, live free, love God, spouse, family members and others they are in relationship with. Life and relationships become healthier and more productive.

People often do not have healthy boundaries because they do not understand the concept of boundaries and have not experienced healthy boundaries in their lives. They think that setting boundaries is selfish and hurtful. Christians are especially susceptible to this confusion because of God's call to love and serve others. They think boundaries are incompatible with a humble, loving attitude. Actually, it is not loving to allow others to violate your boundaries at will. God is a God of love and a God of boundaries. He is a God of balance and people need to strive for balance in their lives. There may be a time when one will turn the other cheek, but at another time he will take the appropriate action to protect himself. Healthy boundaries in lives mean that people have the choice, depending on God's will for their lives at that time. "NO" is not a bad word. It is usually the first word children learn and it can be the point at which you begin to set healthy boundaries in your life.