

Family Boundaries

I want to talk about boundaries within the family. If I could do one thing, that would be the best thing if I can fulfill a wish would be to be able to sit down and have a cup of coffee with each of you and talk about our families because in a sense, the boundaries in our family should be the easiest. But in reality, they are the toughest. It's where conflict can occur the loudest and the worst for those in ministry. There will be that tension unless we begin to talk through and set those boundaries. The issue here is one of limits.

So I want to talk about limits in a general way to begin with and then get very specific in relationships to how we can set some of those limits or build those limits or boundaries into our family life because let me say at the very front, we can have a flourishing ministry, we can be impacting people in our Christian organization, we can be seeing people come to faith in Jesus Christ, but if we lose our family or if there is a feeling of resentment in our family against us and the church or God Himself, then we really lost out on everything. So this maybe the most important of all the conversations that we would have together is about setting boundaries in the family.

Behind our insatiable desire for more to be involved in more I think sometimes is the fear of missing out. The world celebrates taking things to the extreme. It challenges us to push past our own personal limits. Now, put that in the context of ministry and it's easy for us to get sucked into that, constantly trying to please people or be there for people because what we really want to do is just serve them and love them and then help them to make a difference in their lives, to see God by our presence, by us resourcing them, change into what He'd have them to be.

I remember an old missionary that used to say, "I'd rather burn out and rust out." That sounds wonderful in the context of a mission conference. But when you think about it, I don't like either of those options. To burn out? I'm of no good. To rust out? I'm of no good. So we have to build limits into our lives. Most of us have a heart for others. But without limits we find ourselves out to save the world and that can become an extreme thing. It's a great idealism. But how we pull that off from reality is all about boundaries.

Because as we said previously, God designed every one of us with certain limits. Every one of us has a need for sleep, food. We see our limits, even in terms of our physical strength, decrease the older we get. We're not able to do the things we once were able to do. We think so here but we're not always able to pull it off. He intended, I believe, for us to identify our priorities and build into our lives certain boundaries or margins. When I'm talking about margin, I'm talking about the amount of available, beyond what is actually needed, what we'll call the extra or the reserves.

Margin is a space, if you will, between our current performance and our limits. So we have to understand what that margin is. What we're able to do and what the extreme end of that might be. Now, here's the warning signs that we've got to look for. When the margin of our life begins to shrink, there are some things that will happen. You don't have to be a genius to figure the first one out and that is stress levels go up.

When margin shrinks in my life, when I am cranked up to my max peak of performance 24/7 for a period of time, stress is going to be way, way up there. The place where it most often will impact is—you guessed it—at home. Not with those people that I'm ministering to because I'm, for the most part, on my best behavior. I want to look good and I want to at times represent God well. Those stress levels will go up.

Secondly, focus narrows. When the margin in my life begins to shrink, the focus will be just on that one thing because I'm performing at the top level. I'm not able to multi-task. I'm not able to look at those things when I'm having a conversation with someone maybe even in a counseling situation. I'm not hearing all the nuances that might be taking place. And then, most importantly or worse of all is relationships suffer because relationship for the most part happens within the margin.

I'm able to develop and nurture those relationships primarily in the family in that realm of margin where I'm performing but there's still some space there between that performance and my limit. I like what Jennifer Yang said. I can relate to this. She said, "I try to take one day at a time, but sometimes several days attack me at once." And that's the reality of our lives, particularly in ministry where there is always someone with a need or concern or simply wants to have a conversation to bounce something off of you, to see what's going on if you will help them in that whole process.

Now, here are some common fears that can push us toward a lifestyle that's unsustainable. The first as I mentioned is the fear of missing out. Oftentimes we'll hand off responsibilities to people but we still show up for the meeting. Why is that? Because we're afraid we're going to miss out on something. We want to be on-the-know. We don't want to be left out in the loop. So we've got to find that balance. We've got to create that limit. The fear of falling behind. There is more to do because I took some time off or I took the afternoon and did a different sort of perspective or a Sabbath or spent more time in prayer with God. And then we feel like we're behind all the time.

Fear of a missed opportunity. If we create that limit or that margin or those boundaries, what happens if we miss out on that opportunity that maybe the most life-changing for them and for us? And fourth, the fear of not mattering. Maybe that's the biggest one for those of us who believe that we've been called to ministry that we're serving in an organization as the kingdom impact that we do not be in a situation where what we're doing really doesn't matter that we feel like we're just changing light bulbs or we're a cog in the machinery of life.

Now, let's take those ideas of limit and pull that into the context of balance between ministry responsibilities and family. Let me say upfront, and you know this. Ministry responsibilities are never finished. There's always something more to do. So we never come to the end of a day or week and say, "Wow! I've got all these people problems taken care of. That counseling situation has been resolved in that one hour meeting." All of the issues of the church in terms of the responsibilities are taken care of, that doesn't happen. So we have to understand that ministry responsibilities are always going to be there. They're never finished.

Sometimes I will volunteer when I know that some people are painting our house and I'll go over and say, "Hey, I love to do painting. Can I come paint a room for you or paint your basement?" or whatever and people think I'm half crazy. One of the things I learned early on in ministry is that I need some things in my life that when they are done, they are done. And so I would go and paint somebody's room, spend two, three hours or whatever because there is a deep satisfaction in me when I walk away from that and I look at that room and say, "It is complete." That's an unusual thing in my life.

Ministry also can provide us with some great satisfaction. It's never complete but there's great satisfaction in that. That's why it can be so intoxicating. That's why it can keep drawing us back because there is deep satisfaction. When we have ministered to someone in the name of Jesus Christ, when the

Spirit of God has done something between us and we begin to see something happen in that person's life, that is a powerful moment and thus it can pull us in.

So there's the balance between ministry responsibilities and family. If we're honest with ourselves, our ministry to our family is the toughest ministry that God has entrusted to us. As difficult as needy people can be, as hard as it is sometimes balancing organizational church budgets, administrative issues or people problems on staff or otherwise, the family is probably the greatest but most difficult ministry that God has entrusted to us.

Here are some nuts and bolts sort of things that we need to wrestle through when we talk about boundaries. We must determine for ourselves how many nights we will be out a week. Make this clear to the leaders of your church or your organization. Make sure their expectations are what you have in mind as well. And then make a contract with your family. Mark it on the calendar. I was just watching an interview with Eugene Peterson and they were talking about a new book that he had written and he tells the story there about how he went to his elder board and resigned from the church.

One night when he was sitting there with his four-year-old daughter and she asked him to read a story and he said, "I can't read it tonight. I have to go to a meeting." She said to him, "That's the 463rd night that you had a meeting." He went to that elder meeting and he resigned saying that there is nothing that should be more important than reading to my four-year-old daughter.

Now if you think about that and put it in the context of all of our ministry in our life, our family is the most important thing to us, and so we're going to have to find that balance to mark the calendar, to make the contract, to have the conversation with church leadership. We cannot be out to save the world and lose our family because then we lose everything. I remember going to seminary and having conversations with guys whose fathers had been pastors and how they had gone through a period of time where they felt neglected by their dad.

I know that comes with the territory at times that sometimes there are emergencies and there are issues. But we have to be able to set some of these boundaries. And so the schedule will fluctuate for us I think depending on the season of life with our family. A part of this schedule must be regular time with our spouse. To me, that's a huge priority. Maybe it's a regular date night. Maybe it's simply having coffee, a conversation, because one of your main ministries, if not the main ministry, is to make sure

that you're still nurturing and building up your wife and encouraging her. Allow her to be a part of your life and your ministry. It is your ministry together that God has called you to.

Find the right balance in what she needs to know about what's going on with church activities or in relationship to people. She needs to be a great sounding board for you but always be careful. I've made a rule in my life that I will share with my wife only those things that I think she needs to know about other people particularly. I never want to tell her something about someone that when she looks at them now, it'll change the way she looks at them. It's a difficult thing because sometimes you need that confidante. You need your soulmate to be a balance and to bounce things off. Just don't do any harm when it comes to her and her relationship to others in the church.

I regularly read a blog by Mark Beeson who is the pastor at Granger Community Church at South Bend and I love what he writes here. Let me just read a portion of it. He says, "Sheila and I get asked about our marriage from time to time. People wonder how we schedule our time and prioritize our goals, resolve conflict, achieve intimacy, deal with our adult children, and manage our money. I get lots of questions which I assume arise from a desire to know what helps a marriage and what doesn't. I don't mind the questions even though I don't answer all of them."

And then he says, "I recently made a request to Sheila. I thought I'd tell you what I asked her to do for me even though I'll probably never tell you the details of her final response. I asked." And here's a great question to ask your wife to bring her in a little bit closer but also when these boundaries in a marriage relationship. Here's what Mark Beeson asked his wife Sheila. "What do you want me to achieve in the next ten years?" I asked. "What would you be celebrating if your deepest prayers for me were answered and ten years from now you are able to say, 'My hope has been realized. You were successful in accomplishing the thing I most hope you would. I pray the Lord will give you the success and He did.'"

It's interesting. What is it that she would say? He says, "Looking back ten years from now, what did I accomplish that made your heart sing?" I told her, "I want to honor you. I want to serve you well. Take a few days and think about your answer. What do you want me to accomplish. What success do you want from me?" Now he says, "You'll probably never be privy to Sheila's answer but I will. Whatever she tells me will help me more than you know."

Your wife is your best asset ministry. She's the one that can look you in the eyes and speak truth out of love because she knows you better than anyone else. She knows you when all of those barriers and guards come down. Do you listen to her? When we talk about creating some of these boundaries in the family, we need to carve out that time with our wife with these kind of conversations. How are you feeling? What's going on? How's your heart? Are you growing? What is it that you need to say to me that I may not want to hear but I need to hear?

I recently heard Dr. Crawford Lorrits at a men's conference say that this wife had 100 percent veto power over his calendar. Wow! That's a huge statement but it says to her and everyone else that she is a priority in his life. That's how he finds balance. It is also our responsibility to teach folks in our churches what our roles are not and it's our responsibility to help folks understand that because they won't know unless we clarify that because for some people, we are almost everything. If there is a question they have, they don't think anything of calling us or these days texting us in the middle of dinner time.

What are our roles? Doug Fields from Saddleback Church Youth Ministry Guru tells a story of a guy who left his wife after anniversary dinner to go minister to a kid. Part of us admires that dedication that that pastor had to his students but would have been better probably for him to stay to this kid which Doug Fields says, "I love you, but if you're not dying and this is not an emergency, I'll call you tomorrow." We need to help people see that because sometimes their emergencies feel like that at the moment or they simply need someone but tomorrow will do when we find ourselves especially in family situations.

Doug Fields says that he communicates to people that "I can give you 80 percent of me 100 percent of the time or I can give 100 percent of me 80 percent of the time." If we give 80 percent 100 percent of the time, we'll be burnt out and our ministry will be over after a short period of time or maybe we'll still be plugging along but we will have lost a lot of good years watching our kids grow up, conversations with our wife, and maybe even some of that time where we were caring for our own souls and being quiet instead of ministering. You can give 100 percent of yourself 80 percent of the time and find that balance.

So here's the summation of what we've said in this lecture. If your spouse feels like the church or your ministry organization is your mistress, you're part of a problem that you're trying to solve. If your family feels neglected, I'm not saying is neglected but if they simply feel neglected, then you're part of a

problem. We live in a society that prioritizes many things over the family and we must be able to speak with moral authority on this. We must not only say family is important and nurturing and training those children and loving your own wife well is a priority when we don't live that way. We've got to model it. We've got to not only believe it but behave out of that.

If you missed your kids' last three games, if you haven't had dinner with your spouse in a long time, then you need to fix that. You need to post some boundaries there. You need to prioritize the role that no one else can play and that is your role in the family. You need to prioritize that over the one that many other people can play, and that is whatever you do in ministry or the workplace. What we say we believe, we must do. It must be in line with what we proclaim and what we teach others.