

# Relationship Boundaries

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Well, in this installment of the conversation we've been having about boundaries, boundaries in Christian organizations and in ministry, I want to talk about maybe the most difficult of all those boundaries and that's the relational piece. We're going to talk about people and that's always a double-edged sword when we talk about ministry. It's like somebody once said and maybe you've said it yourself that if it weren't for the people, the ministry would be just outstanding. And, yet there are times that that's true. And yet people are also what makes ministry the blessing that it can be for so many of us.

If you have any ministry experience at any length of time or you've been involved in a Christian organization, you've probably heard the horror stories. Or maybe you have created some of those horror stories. It begins here by talking about boundaries in our relationships with those that we minister to and even those that minister to us. HP London on his book entitled *The Heart of a Great Pastor* talks about the gathering of some pastors and their wives and they began to share some of their struggles that they've had in their ministries and it got a little tough at one point where one of the pastors by the name of David began to talk about some of the pain in his congregation.

And he said, "My situation is tougher than you can describe. People are brittle, demanding, unresponsive, touchy. I often want out and I complain to God and yet I know that God sent me here. I know that he keeps me here. Humanly I want to quit but a few good parishioners stand by me. They care about my wife and me. They care about God and His work. Even though I want to bail out at times, I just can't leave."

And then he said, "It's like, well, it's like I stand on holy ground." One of the others pastors' wives that was seated there spoke up after a moment of quietness by everyone soaking that all up. And she said, "I never thought of our setting for service from that perspective. This discussion puts our situation in a whole new light. And I like how you said that, that we stand on holy ground."

I kind of just want to put that into our minds for a moment as we talk about people because that can be a difficult situation for us. Those conversations, good or bad, those criticisms, those issues that we have with folks, I want to remind us as we involve ourselves in ministry, whatever aspect you're involved in, that every conversation we have with people, every counseling situation we find ourself in, I

would even argue almost every meeting that we're involved in, every relationship that we seek to nurture needs to be viewed from that perspective that we, in our role and simply as Christians, represent the Living God.

In those moments that we find ourselves, that place, that conversation takes place on Holy Ground. When we have invited God into that moment, in a business meeting or a counseling situation or a conversation with someone and once you are seeking the challenge, maybe provoke them a little bit in their walk with the Lord, now that can be considered Holy Ground, that we are always in conversation with those who have been created in the very image of God.

And sometimes we know that image is a little bit mottled. Sometimes it's a little bit messy. I recognize it every morning I look in the mirror. But we need to recognize that we stand on Holy Ground as we represent the Living God in those conversations and that God has called us to do that. That moment can be used for God and by God in a miraculous way. But healthy boundaries in a relationship are tremendously important piece of the conversation. So, let's get at it.

I will think through three relational areas where boundaries come into play: counseling situations, what I'll call congregational perceptions, and I'll unfold that a little bit for us, and then, also I'm working with volunteers. The church and most Christian organizations are full of volunteers. It's the very heart of what we're able to do. So we need to have some boundaries for them and for us. So let's tackle the boundaries in counseling to begin with.

My thinking about this has probably radically changed more than any other area over the years because I remember as a young seminarian sitting in a class on pastoral counseling and pastoral issues, hearing my older professor talk about making sure that you didn't do counseling with a woman by yourself unless it was visible and there were open areas, that he had even set the boundary for himself of never driving alone with another woman or having a lunch or dinner meeting with a woman where his wife wasn't present. And I thought to myself "Now, that's a little ridiculous. That seems absolutely crazy that you wouldn't do that. What was this guy thinking?"

And, at that point, I've got to say to you now after twenty-six years of ministry, I was naïve and I was a young-buck pastor who didn't recognize the great wisdom that this older man was saying. I look back at my professor's words now and I nod in agreement having seen far too many potentially dangerous relational encounters for myself and for others that I've had conversations with. And I have learned over the years that it is better to err on the side of safety especially in this realm of counseling.

So to pull back from the start, to create those boundaries for myself when it comes to counseling situations because it's easier to set them at the start than to try to go back and create the boundaries, after the fact.

So, let me just share with you a couple of the boundaries that I have set for myself. First of all, I do no marriage counseling with just one partner. Now, I know that sounds kind of strange. Marriage counseling with one partner? Right. It doesn't usually work that way and that's part of the reason that I don't do it with just one partner. You can't work on a marriage with just one of the spouses involved. I want to make sure that both of them are there. And one of the reasons that I have imposed that boundary particularly for myself is because 99 percent of the time, it's the wife that wants to have a conversation with me about her marriage.

I'm willing to have a conversation out in the atrium at church. I'm willing to have a conversation where there is a group of people about that. But I can't do any kind of marriage counseling without both of those parties. And it would be true of a husband coming to me as well, that I say to him, "I understand and I hear your concerns and I'm worried about that as well, so let's have a conversation together. Think these boundaries important are for us."

When it comes to counseling a woman or if you happen to be a woman in ministry, counseling with someone of the opposite sex as well, then I would emphasize to you I will do it one time. And I'll make sure that the doors are open, that it's during office hours, and that it's an appropriate place with lots of windows and there are other people that will be around. I want to create that boundary because it expresses something to that individual, that woman, or for a woman to the opposite sex if you're counseling a man, it says something that I value this and I want to make sure that this is appropriate.

I usually will then refer that woman to someone else. And I don't even disciple other women even if they happen to be women in leadership. I find other women in the church or I gather a group of women together and that we have a conversation or there might be a study or there might be some counseling that might be involved in that. I set that boundary for myself because I want to make sure that's in place for my safety as well as for the safety of those.

I'll also add that I'll invite my wife into any situation that I find uncomfortable because I want her to know that I'm being honest about this. And that this is a boundary for me that I take very, very seriously. My office is full of pictures of my family and especially my wife. And I want that to communicate

something as well. So, that's just one of those areas that I don't want to underestimate the value of setting that boundary early on.

I think it's also important to set the boundary of interactions between you and children and students and particularly, if you are in a youth ministry, or you're working in an organization which is highly directed towards students or children. I have a friend of mine who pastors in Texas and there was a pastor in his community which he was at that church, who said that whenever he went to visit the pastor, that there was sort of a daycare and there was a lot of children activities that were going on there and there didn't seem to be any boundaries between that pastor and his relationships and conversations with some of those younger kids.

Later on, in his ministry there were some accusations about improprieties with those children. Now, I don't know if they were true or not, but what I want to emphasize is do everything in the light. And if there might be some question about how you're interacting or about conversations that may be inappropriate or crossing a boundary that just doesn't feel right, back up and reset that boundary for your safety and for the other individuals involved.

Here's a point that I want to emphasize, and you know this, but let me say it. Most Christians would not go into any kind of situation planning on sinning. When we do, it's usually because we don't plan not to and that's the emphasis in setting boundaries relationally, that we have to plan not to. We have to build margin. We have to allow limits or boundaries to keep us from going into a territory, whatever that territory may be, that we need to avoid. And this is especially true in the area of sexual temptation. It is one of the most powerful forces and also one of the most devastating for those in ministry and in leadership of Christian organizations.

Because according to scripture sexual sin is in a category all by itself. And I think it's one of those areas that we don't take seriously enough. It's an area I think that our enemy uses against us. Being leaders who are involved in very passionate things, sometimes we put our hearts out there and we wear our emotions on our sleeves, and this is one of those areas that ultimately can come back to bite us.

Instead of seeing how close we can get to the line, I think we need some clear strategies for creating boundaries that encourage sexual purity in all of our relationships. This margin, when we build it in, ensures that when we do fall, we don't fall into sin. That we've created enough of those boundaries that when we find ourselves saying something or moving in the direction that we will catch ourselves. And

I created what I call some speed bumps or some obstacles that I must sort of run through, two or three, and hit some of those before the crash, ultimately, if you will.

The idea is that they're going to slow me down like speed bumps or obstacles. Sort of those big orange cones that you don't hit the bridge but you pop those and the water flies all over. That I ultimately once I begin to hit a couple of those I recognize the flying debris that I've gone through. And it is a warning signal to me that I'm heading for big, big trouble. I've learned over the years to monitor regularly what's going on in me.

I've taught in classroom settings for a number of years, college classes and Bible studies and there's something that I've learned about myself, is that, first of all, I know I'm wired because I love to interact with people. I'm very relational. But I also like to please people and I love to have people respond back to me. And one of the warning signals I've learned particularly in college settings is that a red flag must go up in my heart and in my mind when I find myself trying to impress that beautiful-looking young lady in the second row of the classroom. That's a red flag. That's a warning sign. Be careful there.

Or at times if I'm speaking in front of an audience and I want to impress them or I want them to think well of me, then I might move in the direction of humor. And not long ago, I was preaching a message and my wife said to me afterwards on the way home, "You went for the humor today, didn't you?" So, it was kind of a "Oh okay, yeah." Are you speaking truth or are you impressing people? Those are some of those boundaries that may not lead us in morality but they lead us in the realm of pride, which is always an issue for those of us in leadership and in pastoral ministry.

So, those are some of those barriers. Those are some of those warning signs for me that I've built in. Everybody has moral limits. And our temptation always is to live right on the line. Each of us must find some time or spend some time formulating a strategy for creating some of those moral limits. And drawing boundaries may mean for some of us taking some extreme measures, depending on what our past experience has been or what we've been involved in.

As we seek to reestablish some of these boundaries we may have to take some extreme measures. Some may look at that and say, "Wow that's a little bit much." Like a friend of mine I know who is a businessman and travels a lot. When he goes into a hotel room he asks them to remove the television from his room. We say, "Well that's a little extreme." For him, it's not. It's a boundary that he's put. It could be a bit uncomfortable at times, but seat-belts aren't always convenient for us but we know many

times they save lives. We cannot afford to be less than firm in our convictions when it comes to boundaries in counseling and in relationships in this way.

Let me move on to a second area and that's what I call congregational perception. I didn't know how else to phrase this but what I'm talking about is how people perceive you as a pastor or as a leader of a Christian organization or as a Christian counselor. Simply by virtue of your position, people have a tendency to put you up on a pedestal. And so we have a tendency to go in one direction or another when it comes to this whole issue. We can come to believe that we are all that, that we believe that what they say about us is true that we like being up on a pedestal. And then begin to put up such a facade that way that maybe even God gets sick of us, that He's thinking, "What is wrong with you?"

I'm reminded of a story of King Josiah 2 Chronicles 26. You'll have to go back and read the story of Josiah. He began, after a period of time, to believe his own press clipping. He overstepped his boundaries and began to offer up incense that only the priests should have offered up. And if you remember the story, if you go back and read the story, God struck him with leprosy because the principle here is, God will not share His glory with anyone. So, we've got to be careful in that or we'll try to maintain that perception that people have us up on the pedestal and we'll try to maintain that so we'll spend a lot of time pleasing people, letting them continue to think that we are so wonderful when in reality, we're not all so wonderful.

Here's the key. Perception is reality in ministry. You can't be perfect. You'll never please everyone. So, when we set boundaries, this is a real key boundary, be true to yourself and especially be true to God. Be who God created you to be. That's all you can be. And don't try to be something for a congregation or individuals as a certain perception. You'll never live up to those expectations. We don't want to be put up on a pedestal because we know how hard it hurts when we fall off of that pedestal.

So, on the other extreme, our tendency is to be authentic or to be genuine, as what we'll often say. Here's a little bit of a warning. You've all probably experienced it. That is always a fine line. People want to know that you are real, that you are human being just like them. That you have life struggles. That you burp as well at times. But we have a tendency, I think, to try to push this too far. There's a fine line always between genuineness, authenticity and crossing a line.

If someone, who I respect, even if only by virtue of their position, I may not really know them that well, but because they're a leader in an organization, I respect them by virtue of that position, if they tell me, too much of their junk, particularly in a gathering, as a pastor, or a Christian leader, I can lose

respect for them pretty quickly. And so, I want to find that balance in being authentic and being genuine and being real. As I mentioned, it is a really fine line. And that we need to be careful to set some of those boundaries in trying to prove that we're just like them, that we're really human. That we don't take too far that people say, "Wow that guy's a mess." Watch out for all of that.

We all need relationships. Even those in ministry, and may I add, especially those in ministry. Keep those who really need you, at maybe a little bit of an arm's length. Serve them. Minister to them. Minister to them well. But be careful and emphasize to make sure that you as a pastor or a Christian leader have some mutual relationships where people accept you for who you are, that they have no expectations, they have no illusions because of your role or position. They get to know the real you. They hear something of your heart, your struggles, your temptations, your issues of life, but they also know that you have a heart after God that you desire to do the best.

My concern in Christian organizations and churches is who pastors the pastor. You need to make sure that you have mutual relationships. And my emphasis there is mutual because oftentimes we'll have relationships that are one-sided where people come to us but we would not necessarily open up and share our lives with them. So who is it that cares for your soul? Who do you regularly allow to serve and minister to you and to your family? That's a huge area when we talk about relationships with people, setting those boundaries, and making sure that part of the boundaries, remember what we put inside there, is also these kinds of relationships.

Let me talk also for a moment about volunteers, and this is always a tricky one. We believe people ought to be more committed to the ministry than they probably are going to be able to be. Ministry is our life. It's our calling. It's what we do 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at least that it's always in our mind and heart. It also is our vocation. It's also how we make a living.

What we're committed to and what we find ourselves passionate about doesn't necessarily always show up on other people's radar screens. In other words, they may not be as fired up as we are about this issue, about this organization, about this service project. And we have to be careful as leaders, as pastors, not to manipulate or guilt people into service. That can ultimately leave a bad taste in their mouth for future ministry. And for some people, it leaves a bad taste in their mouth for who God is.

Our change of perspective is pretty clear that we don't use people. No matter how great the end goal is, people are not tools or resources to be used to meet an end. And we need to remind ourselves of that again; otherwise, we'll find ourselves, constantly whipping volunteers into some ministry or

service area. And we have to be careful also and set boundaries to make sure that volunteers find that balance. That they don't burn out too quickly.

It's been my experience that new people in an organization or in the church get really excited when they first come in. And they volunteer for almost everything. They're involved in this Bible study or they're involved in this service project or they're involved in this ministry area. And they're all excited. We have a tendency then, to overuse them or we don't follow-up with encouragement to them or we don't express appreciation to them.

And what we need to do when people come in who are really excited and passionate is to help them to find that right balance in their life, to help them set some of these boundary areas and always, I think, to make sure we encourage them, that also debrief them after an experience as to what went right, what might not have gone right, where do you see yourself pushing forward in some service areas and maybe backing off some of those others.

The other extreme is those that want to become the pastor's friend. They tend to take everything that you say and they share it with others because now, they're on the inside. "Pastor is my best friend." Well that can come back to bite us at times. Be careful with that. Make sure that you gained a trust relationship with someone. What is confidential is confidential. Be careful not to share it even with some of those very good friends who you know might have a tendency to gossip.

We have a responsibility to help folks like that in this area to set some of those boundaries. But draw boundaries as you do life. Equip them, nurture them. It's about their spiritual growth always when it comes to volunteers, not about completing the work. And sometimes that's difficult to remind ourselves of. So let's have some questions to ask along the way. These are just some guidelines I think for us to remind ourselves when we talk about volunteers.

Is there someone right now who could do a better job of completing the task that I'm working on? Is there somebody else out there? Because remember I'm always going to be looking to equip someone to fill that gap, to work myself out of that position. Am I trying to be too many things to too many people? Remember that there is only one Messiah and it is not you. Third, am I involved in an equipping ministry so that others in the church body are being given an opportunity to exercise their gifts and talents? It's not a one-man or one-woman show ever. Am I training and preparing others to share the work of the Lord in this place?



We realize that there's no ideal situation, but according to Ephesians 4, one of the key roles of a pastor is to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry, all areas of ministry. So maybe one of the most important areas you as a leader of a congregation or even a Christian organization is are you spending amount of time equipping and nurturing people not only for those roles that they're filling but roles that you may fill now that they could then take leadership of?

Fourthly, is my life a total outflow? We should all be immersed in ministry. But even Jesus took some regular breaks for rest and reflection. Fifth, am I learning how to say no? And what we've talked about in these conversations about boundaries is we can't do everything that is asked of us. Stay close to the Lord and discern how he wants us most effectively to spend each of our days. And we'll talk more about that in our lecture on time and management.

And maybe this is a big one for us and that is, am I seeking to see my pastoral goals or organizational goals reached too soon? God wants you to have a dream. He wants you to have a plan. But sometimes the key stress I have found in ministry that causes this boundary breakdown is being impatient with God's timing in this. When we're trying to change or adjust or refine something in the church or ministry organizations, we want to push it, push it, push it. And we have a tendency to push right through some of those boundaries, and at that point to really run over volunteers that can come back to bite us.

Let me wrap up with this quote from John Maxwell which I really appreciate. He said, "When special people touch our lives, they teach us how to live." There's one thing that we can talk about whether it's the volunteers or in all kinds of relationships that there will be people that God will bring into our lives, remember that holy ground that we stand on, who will teach us what it really means to live to have that life that Jesus talked about, the more abundant life, the full life. And my prayer for us, as leaders is that we would be those kind of people in the lives of others, that we rub shoulders with.