

What Are Boundaries

Well, welcome. My name is Drew Brown and I have the privilege of leading the discussion today about this topic of boundaries and what are they. First, let me tell you a little bit about myself. I have been in the pastoral ministry for about twenty-six years. I'm one of the faculty here at CLI. I also do some teaching in some other areas. And it's my privilege to be able to share with you in several sessions a little bit about boundaries. Not that I am any expert on boundaries by any means, but I am continuing to grow and learn in how to set boundaries. And so in these series of lectures that we're going to have together, I want to sort of throw some things against the wall and see how everything pulls together.

I want to begin by introducing this topic of what are boundaries and how do we wrestle through them. And the first way I want to do that is I want to sort of take a little quiz and have you pause for a moment and just to think back over the last seven days of your life. And I want you to ask yourself this question, "Did you lose something?" That is did you lose some time? Did you lose some time with your family? Did you lose some sleep? Did you lose out on a planned activity that you have maybe been looking forward to for several days or even weeks?

And you lost out on these things because of a no problem, not because you had a problem but because you had a problem saying no. Did someone ask you to do something or to give something or be something that you didn't or you couldn't do or you hadn't planned on doing, that you ended up doing just because you couldn't say no? That is an issue that every one of us deals with, of how to say no, of how to set some boundaries in our lives. And I believe this is probably one of the greatest hazards of those who find ourselves in ministry, whether its pastoral ministry or counseling or in any ministry organization. We all need to learn to have boundaries, to set boundaries, to understand what they even are.

But for those of us in ministry, this can be extremely tough. Learning to set boundaries for us maybe the most important thing that we do for ourselves and for those that we minister to. It's sort of a catch 22 because we want to impact people. We want to please people. We want to minister and serve the people, and yet to find those boundaries will be a wrestling match. If we allow things in that don't belong, they can cause trouble in our lives or even destruction.

Now, don't misunderstand. Not all the things that we let in are bad. But we still have to erect boundaries for work and for time. And especially for people in our lives. All those are great things when

we put them in balance and in moderation and proper time and when they're in their proper order. Because if we're honest with ourselves, we can be taken advantage of and, quite frankly, we can take advantage of other people as well. So that's why we've got to wrestle through this whole concept of boundaries.

Whatever God has called you to do and to be needs to be leveraged to its fullest. I'm reminded of the story of Michael Jordan when he arrived at the University of North Carolina. He was a scoring machine from the very beginning as a freshman. And his coach, Dean Smith, came alongside him and said, "Son, if you want to go as far as you can, you're going to need to work on your defense." So, Jordan did. One year in the NBA, as a matter of fact, he won not only the scoring title but he was also the defensive player in a single season, which was a rarity and still is to this day. As he grew older and his step began to slow down in his drive to the basket, he developed a killer fade-away jumpshot that was almost impossible to stop.

Now, why do I say that? Because as we learn to develop boundaries, this will help us. We got to keep working on our game. There are going to be times in our life and especially in our ministry life that we're going to have to look at our boundaries again. We're going to have to change them. We're going to have to develop some of those and at times change that way we're thinking as we grow older or our ministry changes.

For those of us in ministry, boundaries provide a sense of stewardship. That is, I have been given a certain amount of time on this Earth, and I've been getting certain gifts and abilities. How will I use them? How will I leverage them? And boundaries also provide us a sense of responsibility because every one of us will be held accountable by God as to how we use those gifts, that time, those abilities that he gives to us.

Boundaries serve, if you will, as property lines—who you are and who you are not. And that's why I want to begin this lecture talking a little bit about setting some boundary lines for ourselves. We'll not be able to talk about family time or ministry or schedules or even how we set boundaries within the church until we begin with setting boundaries around our own heart, to look at our own lives and to make sure where we are in all of this before we begin to move forward.

The heart issue is not just about managing time in our lives. In Proverbs 4:23 we see this passage. Solomon writes, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the well spring of life." When he talks about the heart here, he's not talking about that organ that we often think about that pumps blood. He's talking about our inner person. He's talking really, in relationship to what we're talking about, he's

talking about our core values. And here's where we come up with our definition of what boundaries are. One of those great books that's become famous is Townsend and Cloud's book on boundaries, a series of those. And this is part of their definition.

They say boundaries are fences, borders, or barriers that both keep things in and keep things out. I love that definition because there are certain things when we set boundaries that we want to make sure are in us. But there are also things that we want to make sure that are outside of us. That's true of our heart as well as when we talk about schedules and time and how to find balance in life. Webster puts it this way, that boundaries are something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent.

And I want to start there with Proverbs 4:23. Notice that Solomon says, "Above all else." You've got to get this right. This is where it begins and I think that's true for us especially in ministry. We've got to start here with our heart. "Guard your heart," he says. Set up a sentinel was the idea. It's a fixed wall. It was those guards that protect a city from attackers. He says protect it and to put our parlance, he says place boundaries there.

We'll talk about monitoring our time. We'll talk about monitoring our calendar. We'll talk about maybe even monitoring our diet or exercise but when did anybody ever tell you to how to monitor your heart? And yet, that's exactly what Proverbs 4:23 emphasizes. Solomon says, "Guard your heart." Guard what goes into your heart and what comes out of your heart. It is the old adage a number of years ago where computer geeks used to talk about garbage in and garbage out. That's sort of the idea here. But we're not taught to monitor our heart or put boundaries around our heart or protect what's coming into our heart. We're just taught to behave. And yet, when we really begin to think about it, the heart is where life comes from.

We love from the heart. We lead from the heart. We pair from the heart. We carry out relations from the heart. We even manage our money from the heart. Everything comes from the heart. Christianity, if we think about it, is really about the heart. It's not about our behavior. It's about what we take in, what kind of boundaries we're building around our heart as we monitor that. And that's why I want to start here as we talk about boundaries. It begins with a personal evaluation of ourselves. Where are we? How is our journey? Where are we at with God? And we'll talk about boundaries and creating some of that white space so that we have that quiet time to go to listen to God or reflect and meditate. But monitoring our heart, I believe, is the first place to begin.

Now, you go to the doctor because you've been having some chest pains and you're beginning to get a little worried that you might be having a heart attack. And the first thing the doctor tells you after

that visit is that you need to lose some weight and you need to begin exercising or you're going to start having worse problems than what you're experiencing now. But you say to the doctor, "Wait a minute doctor. You don't understand. I can't exercise because every time I do, I have chest pains." We want to say, "Fix my heart so I can do those things and exercising and feeling better about myself."

When people become aware that their issue of the heart is greed, we counsel them to write a check. The bigger, the better, if you will. But the person says well, they can't write that check because they're greedy. What we see is there is a connection between doing the discipline, doing the right thing that then lose to a change of the heart or change of the attitude. And I think when we begin to understand setting boundaries as a discipline to beginning to look at putting margin in our life, building fences in certain areas of our life that there will be the tendency, I believe, that God will begin to change our heart in some of those areas of time with him, of family time, of knowing those boundaries and relationships with people that guard as at times quite frankly from our very selves.

Andy Stanley has talks about the fact that he taught his kids to monitor their heart or wrestled with this verse. And he said as he would go to tuck them into bed at night, he would place his hand on her little heart and he would ask them, "Is everything okay in your heart?" And then they'd go through sort of a litany of questions that I think are pretty helpful. Maybe you might want to do this with yourself as you begin this process of thinking through boundaries. Is everything okay with your heart? Mad at anyone today? Anybody hurt your feelings today or this past week that you need to deal with those issues? Anybody break a promise to you?

Are you waiting for somebody to come to you and make things right? Have you had any extended imaginary conversations with anybody lately? Do things come out of your mouth on a regular basis that you have to apologize for or that might embarrass you if certain people heard them? Got any secrets that are eating at you? Anything going on that you hope nobody discovers? Any questions that you hope you're not asked? Have you lied to someone that you love recently?

I don't want to allow junk into my life that will cloud my thinking, my ministry. So I need to build some boundaries. I need to do some self-examination. I need to ask those questions regularly because when we talk about boundaries, we're not just talking about them in our scheduling or activities or our lifestyle. Boundaries I think begin with us and then they begin with our heart. Now, we begin to talk about boundaries a lot of people perceive that setting boundaries is sort of a mean or selfish thing. When you begin to say, "Wait a minute, I can't do all this," people will respond at times, "Well, don't you care about me?"

Well, if we are to run the race properly and finish well, everyone of us is going to need a healthy set of boundaries. God built boundaries into His own design. He creates the world in six days and on the seventh day He has Sabbath rest. He builds that into each of our lives that he's created us with a need for sleep and a need to eat. In ministry, you will feel that you are destined to a life in which you will never have free time or anything that resembles that. And we're on 24/7 really, and if we're not active in something at least it's in the back of our mind.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Yes, there will be interruptions. Yes, you're going to have to sacrifice. You're going to have to stretch out of your comfort zone. But it doesn't mean that you can't maintain some sense of normalcy. HB London who is the head of pastoral care for focus on the family and a long-time pastor writes that the biggest mistake that he ever made in ministry was that he went to every wedding, attended every funeral, was there for every birth, every hospital visit. And he says, "Now looking back he wouldn't have done it that way." He did not live, he says, a balanced life in ministry and that's what we need. That's what I want for all of us. So we must begin by working to strengthen the no muscle that we talked about at the very beginning.

Boundaries give us the ability to know what we can say yes to and what we need to say no to. And for me there are some boundary markers that I like to use. I use Galatians 6:2-5 because for me boundary markers always speak in grace but in truth. I'm going to minister out of grace and truth. What does that look like? Galatians 6:2-5, Paul says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he has something when he has nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load."

Now, I want you to notice this because in establishing boundaries for ourselves, but particularly for other people, we're going to need to learn to exercise grace on the one hand and truth on the other. When you read this passage it seems to be a little bit contradictory because Paul begins first of all by saying, we're to carry each other's burdens in verse 2. And yet in verse 5 he says, "Each one of us should carry his own load." It seems a little bit contradictory there. Let's look at this a little bit closer.

When Paul talks in verse 2 about burdens, he's referring to those overwhelming, crushing boulders that come in to our lives, whether it's a loss of job or it's a serious health issue or maybe it's a marital struggle where there's a question of whether we're going to work through this or not. And what he says there is that it is our responsibility, each one of us, to come along side of that individual, to walk him or

her through that issue, to help them carry that heavy load that overwhelming boulder, if you will. But we will eventually put it down after a while.

In verse 5, when talks about the load, it's like a knapsack that a hiker would carry on his back when he would go mountain climbing. Sort of daily ration for the climb, maybe some food, at least some water. And what he means by that idea of burden that each of us should carry our own load, as the NIV translation is this, is that all of us have the daily stuff of life that we are to carry alone. It's what Jesus referred to as the cross that we take up daily in Luke 9.

So what see here is we want to find this balance because what we find too often is that there are some people that we encounter who are allergic to their own backpack, to their own knapsack. And they will find that good co-dependent pastor, which is us sometimes, who will gladly take that from them. It's not our responsibility to carry that daily burden, that daily load for them. It's theirs to carry. So when they come to you and say, "I'm unhappy. I'm just not feeling really good about myself. Can you make me happy?" That's not your responsibility. And yet, for us, as pastors sometimes, those who want to minister to other people, we want to be able to do that. We want to come alongside and make them feel better. This is where we need to begin to develop some boundaries.

So the first point that we need to understand is boundaries give us clarity, what we're responsible for, and what we are not responsible for. We need to be able to create white spaces, if you will, or margins sort of like what's on the calendar. There's those margins. That's what we need to be able to create. In the day and age of the past, it used to be determined by the rising of the sun and the setting of the sun. Not anymore, because with all of our technology, we can go 24/7 and never get the kind of rest that we need.

Many of us pride ourselves on being workaholics. The white spaces for many of us, that margin of our lives, is beginning to disappear. We're going to have to create this. At times, we're going to have to fight for this because it won't be given to us. Boundaries give us clarity, what is it that I'm responsible for and what am I not responsible for particularly when it comes to people issues. Secondly, boundaries also help us confront love. Remember our two boundary markers: grace but also truth. And boundaries help us because there will be times when we're creating these boundaries of being able to say no to people, not right now to people, that we're going to have to confront them.

People have problems. We know that. And we have to be able to confront them about them. I think of prophet Nathan when he confronted David about his sin with Bathsheba. Not easy but it needed to be done. He was called by God to do it. Or Paul when he confronted Peter in the early church when

Peter was one way with the Jewish folks but a different way when it came to the Gentiles. And Paul confronted him and said, “Whoa, wait a minute there’s an inconsistency in your life.” Or even Jesus in the Book of Revelation who confronts the churches in Revelation 2 and 3.

All of this comes out of a core of love in relationships. And when we confront someone, probably the best mode of doing that is first of all, reassure them about relationship, that we care about them, that we love them. To say to them in essence “I am your biggest fan. I love you but there’s something else that we need to talk about.”

I think even in a marriage relationship, I know with my wife and I that we have done that enough over the years that when she begins to see me front end loading some things like “You know I love you, I’m your biggest fan,” her response at times is “Just get with it.” She knows what’s coming. But we have to do that because at the heart of this confrontation is the basis of a relationship. I don’t want to leave you where you are. I want you to get better. And this is one of those areas they help us confront in love.

In Ephesians 3:17 Paul says, that we’re being rooted and established in love. Now, the question we have to ask ourselves is, so why don’t we confront other people? Well, there are some obstacles to this. First of all, makes sense, it’s the fear of the loss of love. Even though we’re setting these boundaries and we need to say to someone, “I can’t do this or here’s an area that’s not something I can intervene with, or it’s not my responsibility,” we’re afraid to say that to people because of the loss of love. If I tell you the truth, you’ll pull away. And what we do in essence is create sort of a terrorist hostage situation. That I am held hostage by this fear that you may feel like I don’t love you. We’ve got to push through that.

We also are afraid of anger and rage. Most of us, by nature, are conflict avoidant. We don’t like conflict. But we must be willing, particularly in ministry of any sort, we must be willing to have people get mad at us. I know that’s not a great opportunity or proposition for us, but it’s a reality. It’s hard for us because for the most part we want to make a difference in people’s lives. We want to please them.

I often think of the guy who is very frustrated at me after I’ve confronted him in love about some truth that the guy is this 180-pound guy who’s throwing a tantrum like a three year old. It makes me look at him a little bit different and doesn’t cause me to sort of get angry at what he’s doing at that moment. Slow down and don’t let the anger side track you. Boundaries are important and sometimes, a part of that is confronting in love.

And then one of the other reasons that we don’t confront is because of simply guilt, right? You know, guilt, the gift that keeps on giving and giving and giving. Saying no or speaking truth to people

hurts them. It hurts them because they already have in mind what they want you to do. They may already have an agenda for you, certain expectations. But here's the rest of that statement. It doesn't harm them. It may hurt at the moment when we create a boundary, when we say no to people, but what we need to understand in the long run, it doesn't really harm them if we'd handled it well and we've done it in love.

So here's your homework at the end of this lecture. What I'd love for you to do some time this coming week or in the next several days is to go back and read Galatians 1. As you read that, pray, maybe this simple prayer, "God, would you make a God-pleaser not a man-pleaser." For those of us in ministry, really for all of us in relationship with other people, this is really the prayer that we need to pray. When we look about boundaries, grace and truth must be our boundary markers in all things. And when we do that, the good ones, the folks that we have relationships with, those who really care for us, will love you all the more. For these boundaries are for your benefit as well as theirs.