

# Boundaries



*Nehemiah 2:17-18 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." 18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.*

## **Protecting our God-given space**

A boundary is an invisible protective fence around our personal God-given space. Boundaries keep people from abusing us, bursting into our space and controlling us, or getting us to do things before we have a chance to think or say no. Our boundaries also keep us aware of others' boundaries so that we do not break into their God-given space to control or abuse them.

These invisible "fences" mark off a "space" around us that no one else has a right to come into without our permission. With healthy boundaries we can protect ourselves from people who would control us – everybody from strangers to friends, parents, mates, or children. Although with boundaries we may still hear people's harsh words, insinuations, criticisms and attempts to control us, we can stop these control devices from coming through when we need to. When we do stop them, we are protecting ourselves from having to act, think, or feel in ways we do not choose.

A boundary is something you are supposed to have. It is not "keeping people out" so that you don't ever interact with them. It is a "membrane" that gives you protection from being controlled by others and from controlling them, but through which you can have healthy relationships.

With healthy boundaries you can choose whether you will say yes or no to other people, to requests from your kids, to your wife or husband, or to people outside your family. You can also use boundary to give you time to choose what interpretation to give certain data, regardless of the interpretation of others. By being in control of your own thinking you can influence your emotions so that you don't have to feel unnecessary guilt, shame, pain, fear, or anger.

*Job 19:1-6 Then Job replied: 2 "How long will you torment me and crush me with words? 3 Ten times now you have reproached me; shamelessly you attack me. 4 If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone. 5 If indeed you would exalt yourselves above me and use my humiliation against me, 6 then know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me.*

Here Job found it necessary to enforce a personal boundary. He told his friends that they had no business trying to dig up or fabricate things he had done wrong. Four thousand years later we still find many codependents meddling in other people's misdeeds, both real and imagined. That is God's job, not ours. The Twelve-Step Recovery Programs ask us to conduct our own moral inventory, not anyone else's.

*Job 27:1-6 And Job continued his discourse: 2 "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul, 3 as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, 4 my lips will not speak wickedness, and my tongue will utter no deceit. 5 I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. 6 I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.*

With a good internal boundary, you can be in a relationship without allowing the other person's fear or pain to become your own and overwhelm you. With a healthy internal boundary, you can truly detach from other people while staying in caring relationships. You can begin to choose your own behavior, thinking, and feeling reality rather than making strong automatic responses that baffle you.

Therefore, learning to set an internal boundary is a very big part of recovery from codependence. Learning to set a healthy internal boundary usually takes more time, practice and patience than setting an external boundary because it's not something you can touch or feel.

As you develop your own internal boundary system, you will learn to recognize when someone has authentically transgressed your internal boundary, and when you have transgressed someone else's internal boundary.

*1 Corinthians 5:9-11 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. 10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.*

Paul was not urging us to be snobs, or to close ourselves off from the "real" world. Instead, he was warning us not to associate with those who claim to be spiritual but continue to pursue an immoral or unhealthy lifestyle. It might just drag us down. This is not a matter of judging, but of boundary-setting. We must preserve the integrity of our own faith and recovery, and therefore we need to set clear limits on whom to associate with.

*Ephesians 6:2-3 "Honor your father and mother" – which is the first commandment with a promise – 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*

Who knows better how to push our buttons than family members? Who, besides family members, do we give such power? No matter how long we or our family members have been recovering, relationships with family members can be provocative. One telephone conversation can put us in an emotional and psychological tailspin that lasts for hours or days.

Sometimes it gets worse when we begin recovery, because we become even aware of our reactions and our discomfort. That's uncomfortable, but good. It is by beginning this process of awareness and acceptance that we change, grow and heal.

The process of detaching in love from family members can take years. So can the process of learning how to react in a more effective way. We cannot control what they do or try to do, but we can gain some sense of control over how we choose to react.

Stop trying to make them act or treat us any differently. Unhook from their system by refusing to try to change or influence them. Their patterns, particularly their patterns with us, are their issues. How we react, or allow these patterns to influence us, is our issue. How we take care of ourselves is our issue.

We can love our family and still refuse to buy into their issues. We can love our family but refuse their efforts to manipulate, control, or produce guilt in us. We can set boundaries we need and want to set with family members without being disloyal to the family.

We can learn to love our family without forfeiting love and respect for ourselves.

*2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 9 We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." 11 We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. 12 Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. 13 And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. 14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

In this section we learn about the need to set boundaries at times between ourselves and those in our circles. When people close to us are acting in a way that could harm our spiritual life or our recovery, we are not to judge or reject them, but to warn them in love ("as a brother," v. 15) and then detach from the situation. We need to make two things clear: that their unhealthy behavior has come between us, and that we desire to restore the relationship to its former fullness.

*2 Peter 3:17-18 Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever! Amen.*

To "Be on your Guard" does not mean to distrust everyone, but rather to be discerning and to set appropriate boundaries – in relationships and in ideas. Just as we need to avoid unhealthy people and old hangouts, we need to steer clear of ideas that threaten our faith or recovery. But we also need to remain open-minded enough to accept new information about ourselves and God.

*Revelation 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

Some people enter without knocking. It happens. Our boundaries have not always been respected. As a result, we have built some significant defenses. Our doors have multiple locks. When necessary, they can be latched, barred, bolted, double-bolted and sealed.

As we begin the healing process, however, we begin to experiment with allowing our defenses to come down. We unlatch one lock at a time.

We need people to respect our boundaries. We need people to knock and wait patiently for an answer. So this picture of Jesus is full of good news for us. Jesus stands at the door and knocks. It is pure invitation. God does not invade. He does not demand. He does not manipulate. Instead, he gently, persistently knocks. *He says, "Here I am, I would like to spend time with you."*

Recovery is a process of learning to trust God. Trust grows slowly. We can't do it all at once. But perhaps today we can listen carefully for his knock. Tomorrow we may be able to manage a "Who's there?" And, with persistence, we will someday sit with him and enjoy his loving presence.