



A Quick Reference and Lesson Guide

Boundaries in Marriage

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1 Scenarios and Assessment

Scenarios/Case Studies

A. Scenario #1

1. Rob was always the life of the party. He was spontaneous and lived life large. His spontaneity was one of the main things Sarah admired and loved about Rob. She was a little more rigid. As a meticulous planner, order and cleanliness were her hallmarks. He could make her laugh, relax, and just loosen up. The proverbial wisdom, opposites attract, seemed to fit this newly married couple. It was not too long into their marriage that Sarah began to realize Rob did not take responsibility or anything else very seriously. A missed appointment, clothes continually just thrown about, another credit card opened—these all were things that just seemed to be the norm. Frustration continued to build because Sarah felt she constantly had to cover for Rob. Picking up after him, calling to reschedule an appointment, and trying to make ends meet financially seemed to be on the top of her to do list every day. When Rob came home and told her that he was possibly going to lose his job because of tardiness and absences, Sarah felt frustration beginning to turn to anger.

B. Scenario #2

1. Beth was in tears again, but what else was new? By nature, she was always a little on the emotional or dramatic side. Mark was a strong, solid, level-headed gentleman. He was her knight in shining armor. This arrangement seemed to work well for the first few years of marriage, but for the last several years, Mark felt as if he was being taken advantage of. It seemed anytime Beth wanted her way, she would resort to tears, sickness, or exhaustion. Beth had learned from childhood that these tactics would get her what she wanted. Beth would retort that it was just the way she was, and that Mark knew that when he married her. Mark viewed these actions as a form of manipulation, and he was tired of being controlled. Mark was tenderhearted, but after several years of this, he had built walls around himself, and those walls were just getting stronger.

C. Scenario #3

1. When Heather was dating Phil, his little actions of jealousy were endearing to her. But now, some years into their marriage, Heather felt suffocated at times. Phil's little statements such as, "I really don't want you to go on that shopping trip," or "You are too pretty, and I don't want other guys looking at you," had turned into, "No, you are not leaving this house. When I am at work, you are staying here and working at home." It seemed that somehow, ever so slowly, the endearing jealousy had turned into an all-out choke hold. Heather knew she was quickly losing herself and her sense of identity. She was unsure of the first step to take, and truthfully, even if she knew what step to take, she was fearful to take it.

Definitions and Key Thoughts**A. Facts**

1. A boundary is something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent (Merriam-Webster).
2. Boundaries in a marriage are necessary so the people in that unit do not lose their individual identity.
3. Boundaries can be taken too far or set so rigidly that the individuals do not bond emotionally.
4. When set properly within a marriage, boundaries can help the individuals, as well as the marriage, flourish.
5. Establishing boundaries is necessary, but setting them for the right reason and with the correct attitude or motive is vital.
6. Lack of boundaries always leads to frustration.
7. If score-keeping happens in a marriage, often it means some boundaries have not been established.
8. Those who complain most about setting boundaries are often the ones who have them in place but do not want their spouse to establish any. They are the boundary busters.
9. When there are control issues in a marriage, there will also be boundary issues.

B. Myths exposed

1. Setting boundaries does not mean keeping secrets from one another.
2. If you set a boundary, it does not mean you are free to do as you choose. Spousal boundaries touch each other. What one spouse does affects the other spouse.
3. You can set boundaries and still submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
4. If a spouse sets a boundary, it does not mean that he is trying to control the other spouse. It means he is taking charge and control of his own life.

C. Christian vs. societal norms

1. In Genesis 2:24 (See also Matthew, Mark, and Ephesians.), the Bible specifically speaks of a husband and wife becoming one flesh. Often Christians misinterpret that as two people becoming so intertwined they lose themselves into each other. Such an interpretation would not agree with setting boundaries. God has made us male and female, and He gave certain giftings and talents to each individual. Spouses are to submit to, love, cherish, and respect one another. These biblical mandates entail setting boundaries.
2. The world often looks at marriage as a commitment with the escape hatch of divorce. The world's philosophy is stand your ground, protect yourself, be an individual, and fight for your right. On the surface, this may not sound so bad; however, the motive is to be able to get out of a marriage without as much emotional damage. Married Christians are called to commitment until death.
3. Saving yourself at all cost and saving the marriage at all cost are much different. Sometimes only one is possible. The specific situation will determine which one is the biblical way.

D. Abuse in a marriage

1. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Domestic violence (also called intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic abuse, or relationship abuse) is a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another

partner in an intimate relationship.” (<http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined>) If there are signs of abuse, it may be necessary to stage a professional intervention. Types of domestic abuse include:

- Pushing, shoving, slapping, punching, kicking, choking
- Assault with weapon
- Holding, tying down, or restraining
- Leaving a spouse in a dangerous place
- Refusing to help when spouse is sick or injured
- Threatening harm
- Isolating from others
- Extreme jealousy or possessiveness
- Intimidating, degrading, humiliating, criticizing, insulting, belittling, accusing, blaming, ridiculing
- Ignoring, dismissing
- Lying, breaking promises, destroying trust
- Forcing sex acts against spouse’s will
- Physically harming a spouse during sex
- Criticizing and calling sexually degrading names
- See also

http://www.ncdsv.org/images/AMA_Diag&TreatGuideDV_3-1992.pdf.

Assessment (Interview)

While setting boundaries is a vital part of marriage, at times this can be a dangerous thing for someone to do. It is important to get a clearer picture of how the marriage operates to be certain abuse is not part of the equation. If there is abuse, boundaries are still vital, but may look much different. A situation involving abuse would need to be referred to a professional. Remember, there is no behavior that warrants abuse as a consequence.

A. The following are questions you can ask to ascertain the health of the marriage and its boundaries:

1. Have you ever felt afraid of your spouse? When? How?
2. Has your spouse ever hurt you? Physically, verbally, emotionally?
3. Has your spouse ever stopped you from visiting parents, friends, or church? What was the reason?
4. Does your spouse demand that you be at home most of the time, isolating you from others? Is there a reason given? If so, what is it?
5. Has your spouse ever destroyed something that meant a lot to you? What was the situation?
6. Does your spouse degrade or belittle you in front of your children or others?
7. What happens when you disagree with your spouse?
8. Does your spouse change your words around so you are to blame, no matter the scenario?
9. Have you ever been threatened by your spouse? What was the threat?

10. Are there angry outbursts, days of silence, or isolation/ignoring after a disagreement? Is the only way to resolve the issue to profusely apologize (even when you are not at fault)? What else is required?
- B. The following are things to look for:
1. The person seems very nervous and is worried her spouse may find out she is seeking help.
 2. There are multiple places of injury.
 3. The person seems highly stressed, disorganized, anxious, or depressed.
 4. The person continually blames himself for problems within the marriage.
 5. The person is fidgety, looks down a lot, hugs object (e.g., pillow), rubs own hand or leg, plays with hair (these are forms of self-soothing or self-comfort), or is very emotional (typically crying).
- C. To gather information you can use the following as a guideline:
1. How can I help you?
 - a) You are looking for the bottom line, the presenting problem.
 - b) Don't assume you already know what's going on.
 2. How long and how often has this event been occurring?
 - a) Is this a new occurrence or has this been a trend since you have known each other?
 - b) If a new occurrence, can you think of anything that would have triggered this type of behavior in your spouse?
 - c) If a regular occurrence, where do you think it originated? (e.g., family of origin, modeled from caregiver, reinforced by others?)
 3. Is there anything you have done or have not done that would enable this behavior?
 - a. Are you constantly covering or making excuses for another's forgetfulness, mistakes, outbursts, etc?
 - b. Are you conceding to every whim because you cannot bear your spouse's actions or the consequences if you do not concede?
 - c. Are you doing things yourself because you are convinced your spouse is incapable?
This may be enabling someone, but it may also be a power or control issue. The spouse you are speaking with may have unwittingly created this scenario out of a need to control things, but covered it with the excuse that the spouse "won't do it" rather than the truth, "I do not trust my spouse to do it correctly."
 4. What are your feelings when it seems your spouse constantly gets his way?
 - a. Do you feel annoyed, frustrated, agitated, or angry?
 - b. Are you pulling away from him?
 5. What actions do you take when your spouse seems to always get her way?
 6. What do you think would happen if you changed the way you have always reacted to this action of your spouse?
 7. If something in your marriage changed for the better, what would that look like?

2 Critique and Counsel

Biblical Insight

- A. Each one of us is precious in the sight of God. He made us as individuals. Our Creator knows us so well that the hairs of our heads are numbered (Matthew 10:30). If He keeps a record of when a hair falls out or one grows in, think of the depths of His love and concern for us as unique individuals. With the understanding that we are unique, we are individuals, we are precious, we must also realize that we have our own dreams, desires, feelings, fears, goals, and needs. We are separate from anyone else.
 - 1. We are made in the image of God, as unique individuals. (See Genesis 1:26–27; I Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 2:10.)
 - 2. He fashioned us like He wanted us to be. (See Exodus 4:11; Psalm 139:13–16; Isaiah 64:8.)
 - 3. We have an individual purpose. (See Romans 12:4–5; I Peter 4:10–11.)
- B. When someone takes the vow of marriage, a lot of commands in the Word of God apply to that individual. This does not mean a person's individuality disappears, but it does mean her life is now part of a unit—two individuals become one. They are not enmeshed in the sense that their individual identities disappear; rather the spouses are bonded together so deeply that they affect each other in almost every way.
 - 1. Christ and the church
 - a. The metaphor that Scripture often uses when dealing with marriage is the interaction between Christ and the church. (See Ephesians 5:22–33.)
 - b. Thinking in terms of Christ and the church, it is easy to see how we are dealing with two different things. The church (bride of Christ), made up of individuals, does have an effect on Christ. (See Genesis 6:6; I Samuel 15:11; Jeremiah 18:1–12; Matthew 9:36.) And we know that Jesus has an influence on the church. (See John 15:5; Acts 17:28; Romans 8:28.)

Wise Counsel

- A. Reinforce the idea that each spouse is an individual, which is both a privilege and a responsibility.
- B. Everyone will give an answer for themselves (Romans 14:12).
 - 1. Ask if they are fulfilling their biblical mandates within the marriage.
 - 2. Encourage them to pray about this situation, asking God to grant them wisdom.
 - 3. Are there needed changes in their lives, actions, or attitudes?
- C. Gently help them understand that the only person we can change is ourselves.
 - 1. Is there another way to look at the situation?
 - 2. Is there a better way to handle the situation when it arises?
 - 3. Are they accepting blame or responsibility for the issue being addressed?

- D. In his book, *Nine Critical Mistakes Most Couples Make*, David Hawkins gives reasons for healthy boundaries:
1. Know what you think.
 2. Be able to say “yes” to good things and “no” to bad things.
 3. Know how to make healthy decisions.
 4. Know how our thoughts are different from others’ points of view.
 5. Take responsibility for our actions, but not the actions of others.
 6. Know how to set limits on others’ intrusions into our lives.
 7. Respect others’ ability to say “yes” and “no,” and honor their decisions.

3

Application and Prayer

Application

- A. If applicable to the circumstance, help the individual learn he can indeed say “no” and does not have to let guilt, shame, or self-loathing creep into his thoughts.
1. It is vitally important that the spouse is not saying “no” to take revenge or out of selfishness or some other un-Christlike attitude.
 2. The tone of communication is as important as the content of the communication. (See Proverbs 15:1.)
- B. The old adage is so true, “If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always gotten.”
1. Since the only person you can change is yourself, change how you have always responded in the past.
 - a. Example: If your spouse does not pick up after himself, calmly explain that you will no longer be picking up after him, but will be removing the items from being in your way. Make certain this is not done in a vindictive way (e.g., hiding your spouse’s items, throwing them away), but simply putting them all in a pile out of your way.
 - b. There will be a learning curve for everyone involved. The time frame often depends on how long the behavior has been exhibited. The key to setting a boundary is consistency. If you change your behavior and do not stick with it, your spouse will know she can wear you down, and the boundary will be even harder to establish the next time you try.
 2. Do not make this a sneak attack. Gently, but firmly, explain what has been happening and what your new behavior is going to be.
- C. Make boundaries wisely
1. Please remember the other person does not have to change, and there is no guarantee your spouse will.

2. It is important to have a comfortable boundary with which you can consistently live and not to become frustrated no matter the outcome.

Prayer

- A. Begin by thanking and commending the individual or family member(s) for having courage to seek help and support.
- B. Address in prayer the struggles that have been raised in the meeting.
 Example: *Lord, we thank You that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We thank You that You made us to have choices: choices to worship You, to serve others, to love radically, and to bond with other human beings. In struggles within this marriage, Lord, grant Your wisdom. Help (name) to stay humble and willing to follow Your guidance for him/her, as she/he tries a new tactic. We know that marriage is ordained by You, and it is Your desire for it to work and be a witness of Your love for the church. Give strength and help. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

4 Recommended Resources

- Biuso, J., & Newman, B. (1996). *Receiving love*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- Bottke, A. (2011). *Setting boundaries with difficult people*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.
- Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2003). *Boundaries in marriage*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Cloud, H. (2016). *The power of the other*. New York, NY: HarperBusiness.
- Emerson, E. (2004). *Love and respect: The love she most desires; the respect he desperately needs*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Harley, W. (2011). *His needs, her needs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Revell.
- Hawkins, D. (2005). *Nine critical mistakes most couples make: Identify the pitfalls and discover God's help*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.
- Hendrix, H., & Hunt, H. (2004). *Receiving love: Transform your relationship by letting yourself be loved*. New York, NY: Atria Books.
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- Kiehl, P. (2016). *Creating the healthy marriage you want: Stop accusing & start accepting one another*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Leman, K. (2009). *Have a new husband by Friday: How to change his attitude, behavior & communication in 5 days*. Grand Rapids, MI: Revell.

5 Taking it to the Church

“Boundaries in Marriage”

Lesson Text

“Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband” (Ephesians 5:33).

Frustration is so often the result of a boundary not set or a boundary breached. We are not made to live in isolation, but neither are we made to be controlled by another person. It is the desire of every human being to have power over her own life. Humans want to be able to make decisions, have choices, and enjoy the privilege that those bring. God has made each one of us unique with our own callings and talents. He has set us free from the bondage of sin and death. Now, we are given the promise of abundant life. Abundant living cannot coexist with being controlled, abused, manipulated, or exploited. We are free in Him and we should always be able to live that way.

Ephesians 5:33 commands, “Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.”

Romans 12:3–5; 9–10 says, “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another.”

If you pass through a neighborhood, you will see many houses lining the edge of the street. Each of those houses is sitting on a piece of property sold with that house. The house, the contents, and the property on which it is built are all the responsibility and privilege of the homeowner. As is customary in some neighborhoods, fences are built to outline the border of the property. What is inside the fence belongs to the homeowner. What is outside the fence belongs to the neighbor. Although the property is touching, there is a defined boundary between the two.

The homeowner has every right to protect his property from harm, theft, or any unwelcome intrusion. It is within the laws of the land to ask someone to vacate your property if you so choose. It is your privilege.

Understand, however, that owning property comes with responsibility. You must keep your house up to code and your property clear and mowed according to the city ordinances. You must take care of everything within your property line. If your neighbor has tall grass, it is not your responsibility to take care of that grass. It is your neighbor's responsibility.

We all understand that we cannot just move the fence over because we want a bigger yard. We cannot use our neighbor's patio and barbecue pit without her permission just because we do not have our own. We would get into trouble with the law if we decided to throw rocks through the front windows of our neighbor's house because we were upset.

When speaking of something tangible, how easy it is for us to understand and agree with laws, ordinances, codes, privileges, responsibilities, and cordiality between neighbors. But if you take this property boundary idea to the more abstract, suddenly many people beg to differ, especially when it comes to boundaries in marriage.

Let us compare the idea of throwing rocks through your neighbor's front window to your spouse hurling insults at you. Just as you would not allow the literal damage to your house, you should not allow the emotional damage to your life. Especially since the emotional damage to you is much worse. No, you cannot move your house, so you would either go out and stop the vandal from throwing the rocks or you would get help to do so. In the case of the insults flying, you can remove yourself from the situation or get help to make it stop. The spouse is crossing your boundary of safety, love, and security. You have every right and, really, responsibility to protect yourself from damage.

On a less severe front, if your spouse is crossing your boundary and making his forgetfulness an emergency for you, this again is like something being thrown over the fence into your yard. A gentle conversation including questions such as "How can you be better organized?" or "How can I help you plan this out better?" can relieve both parties of stress and frustration.

Remember that setting a boundary is not building a wall. You are not trying to keep your spouse out, nor are you trying to lose your own identity. Healthy boundaries allow good things in and bad things out. They are set so everyone involved in the relationship agrees on what is expected.

In a marital union, the husband is called to love his wife as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25) and as he loves himself (Ephesians 5:33). Some other commands for the husband are to be knowledgeable of the needs of his wife, honor her, treat her carefully (I Peter 3:7), submit to her (Ephesians 5:21), do not be harsh with her (Colossians 3:19), and be intimately involved with her (I Corinthians 7:1–5). To return to the neighbor-relations metaphor, none of this is analogous to tearing down fences, moving property lines, stealing lawn chairs, or such like.

Wives also are addressed in Scripture. The commands given to them also convey the idea of respecting boundaries. The Bible bears out that wives should submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22), reverence their husbands (Ephesians 5:33), and be sexually involved with them (I Corinthians 7:1–5). There is no command that the wife should be a doormat, be exploited, or made to lose her identity.

Some people understand the idea of setting a boundary when it comes to neighbors, friends, and children, but they wrestle with the concept of setting a boundary when it comes to a spouse. We are told in the Bible that a husband and wife become one flesh. Too often, people interpret that as if we are partial human beings walking around until we find that significant other to complete us. Nothing could be further from the truth.

God has made us precious and special. We are beautiful creations in His eyes. Scripture tells us that we “are complete in Him” (Colossians 2:10). We are whole and entire, fully-functioning human beings in Jesus Christ, not in another human being.

A good way to look at this idea of two human beings becoming one is to think of a small boat. If two people get in that boat together, they now have a lot of things in common. They are both interested in keeping the boat afloat. There are common goals and shared responsibilities. A boat cannot go different ways at the same time, so their direction and focus will be the same. Yes, they are still two people, but they are very much intertwined, and every move each makes affects the other.

A spouse can hurl insults across the boat, damaging the other side. But ultimately if one side of the boat sinks, so does the other. This provides a better picture of the oneness of marriage. Even to a lesser degree, if one spouse is not paddling, pulling her share of the load, the boat cannot move correctly. It may possibly just go in circles, run into something that would cause damage, or, if nothing else, wear out one spouse to a point of frustration. With this picture in mind, it is sometimes easier to understand the idea of two people becoming one.

Often the first question asked when someone is learning to set boundaries is, “Isn’t that selfish?” The answer to that question is, it absolutely can be. This mainly depends on the motive for setting the boundary. If someone decides to set a boundary simply because he does not want to pull his share of the load, he is trying to control another person, or his overall attitude and motivation are not correct. In such a scenario, yes, it certainly can be selfish to set a certain boundary.

Setting a boundary, however, can also be thought of as protecting oneself. Boundaries can protect us from hurt, harm, burnout, frustration, anger, resentment, and a whole host of negative things. If the boundary is set to better the marriage, then it is a good boundary.

“How can setting a boundary that you will no longer pick up after your spouse (as you would a toddler) help the marriage?” First, this is only an example. Some marriages work just fine with certain arrangements that would never work in other marriages. If both spouses are happy with the agreement, then there is no boundary being moved or trespassed. But if one spouse is worn out and/or frustrated over the lack of responsibility taken by the other, then it is definitely affecting the marriage. These are the types of things that need to be addressed, and a boundary needs to be set in place and established.

Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ,” and verse 5 says, “For every man shall bear his own burden.” These verses are not a contradiction in Scripture, but a view of setting boundaries. In Galatians 6:2, we are reminded that sometimes a

load gets too heavy for an individual. If we are able, we are commanded to help them with that load. This is definitely an unselfish act, and it is right in the eyes of God. However, when we look at Galatians 6:5, we see we are all required to shoulder our own loads. It is speaking of the daily hassles, the normal things in life that require us to take responsibility.

In the union of holy matrimony, both spouses are still individuals. They both have needs and desires, hurts and pain, strengths and weaknesses. As a spouse, it is a responsibility and privilege to set up boundaries that help the overall health of the marriage and are not set for selfish reasons. It is also vital that the boundaries of our spouse be respected. Boundary setting in marriage is not always an easy task. It should be done with much prayer, communication, and submission to one another. Boundaries are imperative for the marriage to flourish and for the two to become one.