2 What is a boundary?

Many Christians have difficulties with the term "boundaries", because they have observed it being abused for selfish purposes and as an excuse for not allowing God to guide our life. Understanding the nature of boundaries therefore requires us to understand what boundaries should *not* be.

2.1 Misunderstandings about Boundaries

People have a lot of misconceptions of what boundaries really are. They view boundaries as

- an excuse for doing what they want or for not helping others,
- as limits they set on *other* people,
- as walls for avoiding close relationships between them and others,
- putting God in a box
- as their private zone from where they want to exclude everyone else, even God
- as a means for fixing or changing their spouse, children, and others,
- as an ultimatum, a means to control others through unproportional consequences
- as a punishment for misbehavior

People who understand boundaries in this way, use the expression "*setting boundaries*" just as an excuse for selfishness and an unwillingness to submit to God or anybody else. But that is not what boundaries are. In fact, the meaning of the term "*boundaries*" has been twisted by the world so much that Christians have become afraid of using it – just because they don't know the original meaning of the word anymore. It is the same with the word "*love*", which often is confused with selfish desire and lust, or at least with sentimentality. But should that keep us from using the term in the right way?

2.2 Central Aspects

Setting boundaries has little to do with limiting *others* – it is about learning *self-control* – one of the nine fruits of the spirits described in **Galatians 5:22-23**:

> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance *(self-control)*: against such there is no law

and about taking ownership of our own life, so that we can grow in our faith and develop mature relationships with other people, particularly with our spouse.

So what is a boundary, anyway?

2.2.1 A Property Line: Ownership and Freedom

In the simplest sense, a boundary is a property line. It denotes the beginning and the end of something. In the physical world, boundaries are often easy to see – fences, walls, signs, hedges, or sometimes only a slightly different appearance of the lawn. All this signs indicate the borderline of someone's property. Within these boundaries, the owner is fully responsible for the property, while others are not.

In the mental, emotional, and spiritual world, boundaries – although less easy to see – are just as real as in the physical world. They define our person, who we are and who we are not. We are the owners of everything inside these boundaries. We are free to do with it as we choose but we are also fully responsible for it. That is how God has designed us: we have been given a free will and many talents, but we are responsible for using God's gift wisely. We "own" our soul and that also means that we have to deal with what is in it. **Proverbs 14:10** says:

> The heart knows its own bitterness; and no one else can share its joy.

Yes, we can share a lot with other people, but we are the only ones who really experience what is going on in our own heart. We are the only ones who can *protect* it from bad influences, we are the only ones who can nurture it with good things. God has entrusted us with a life for which we will later be held responsible. But how can we do that, if we don't understand what our boundaries are? That is why we need to learn from the Word of God, where our property begins and where it ends.

I have seen many people struggle with life, just because they do not take responsibility for their *own* life and expect others to step in instead. They blame others for what happens to them and even for what they do themselves. And at the same time they spend a lot of time and energy on other people for whom they feel responsible. It is no wonder that everyday life is difficult and painful for them. God told us to have *self-control*, not *other-control*. We are responsible for *our* life, *not* for the life of others.

2.2.2 Responsibility

At this point, people may ask: "Doesn't the Bible tell us that we are responsible for each other? Doesn't it say that we should carry each other's load? How, then, can we have boundaries?"

Let me say a few words about responsibility. Yes we have the responsibility to carry each others burdens. **Galatians 6:2** says

> Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

But this verse shows our responsibility *to* others, not a responsibility *for* them. It talks about burdens, huge loads that are so heavy for others that they *cannot* carry them all by themselves. Helping them in the time of need is our responsibility *to* them – that is how we show our love for them.

But only three verses later, in **Galatians 6:5**, the Word of God says that each one should carry his own load. That means we have to carry what belongs to us. That is what we are responsible *for*. Notice the difference between *burden* and *load*. A load is what we have to deal with on a daily basis, something that we can handle, even if this requires some effort – like a backpack that we take on a hike. No one should carry it for us. We have to take ownership of our everyday life and we are responsible for carrying the loads that come with it.

Problems arise, when people act as if their burdens are something they can carry alone and refuse help, or as if their daily loads were too heavy for them and something they shouldn't have to carry – or, conversely, if we refuse to help others in need or if we take away from others the load that they should carry themselves.[1] The results of these actions are either constant pain or chronic irresponsibility. If we want to avoid this for ourselves, we need to determine where our responsibility begins, and where it ends.

2.2.3 Fences with a Gate: Protection — Good in, Bad out

Boundaries do not only help us avoid pain or irresponsibility. They are also important for guarding and nurturing the soul that God entrusted us. They are like fences with a gate. You can control what comes in and what goes out. This is very important, because within us are many things that are very damaging to us

> For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man. **(Mark 7:21–23)**

These are the things that must leave our property and we need the ability to let them go so that they cannot poison us anymore. If we find pain or sin within us we need to open up and communicate our innermost to God, so that he can heal and forgive us. But we must keep the gate shut closely when evil is present or if sin wants to *enter* our life in order to protect the good that is inside. **Genesis 4:7** says

> If you do not what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.

On the other hand, we need to be able to let our guards down when the danger is gone and open up for the good things outside. In **Revelation 3:20** Jesus says

> Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

Other people may have good things to give to us as well and we need to open up to them.

So boundaries are not walls but they are no open range either. If we want to grow, we need to control what goes in and what goes out. But if we lack boundaries, we

[1] Of course, we still should pray for each other, particularly for our spouses. But that doesn't mean we should take away from them what is theirs.

allow many bad things to enter our life and good things to be destroyed by them. We will be tossed around by the waves created by the world around us and experience a lot of problems, fears, and helplessness in our struggle against sin.

> He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls. **(Proverbs 25:28)**

If we don't learn to take control of our life by protecting our boundaries, we are a fair game for the devil. We can't lose our salvation – but we won't grow either.
On the other hand, if our boundaries become walls, if we close ourselves off, then we hold the bad and painful inside and keep the good out. People who have suffered from abuse have a tendency to do that and they need to learn to open up in the right way.

2.2.4 Created in the Image of God

The concept of boundaries is also deeply embedded in God's person. God defines himself as distinct being, separate from his creation and from us. He clearly says what he is and what he is not. For instance, God is love **(1. John 4:16)** and not darkness **(1. John 1:6)**. He cannot tolerate sin but invites people, who love him, into his kingdom.
When God made us in his likeness, he gave us responsibilities within limits. He expects is to rule over the earth and to be responsible stewards over what he has entrusted to us **(Genesis 1:28)**. On the other hand, God respects the boundaries of our personality and does not interfere with them, because he wants us to be mature. He does not attempt to control our will or to run our life. He lets us make mistakes even when our bad choices hurt him. But he wants us to be free beings, free to choose between good and bad, because only in freedom we are able to develop a genuine love for God. If we were puppets who cannot choose differently, what could our love mean to him?

God designed his entire creation for freedom. We were not meant to be enslaved by each other; we were meant to love each other freely. But when we turned away from God, we lost our freedom. We became enslaved to sin, to self-centeredness, to other people, to guilt, and to a whole host of other dynamics. But the Bible tells us to set boundaries against such types of other-control and to become free again. In **Galatians 5:1** we read

> Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

When we realize the freedom that we have gained through Jesus Christ, we will be able to develop relationships that are based on love instead of fear, manipulation, guilt, etc. Love can only exist, where there is freedom – both for us and the people around us. Boundaries help us define the freedom we have and the freedom we don't have.

2.3 Why are Boundaries important in Marriage?

Boundaries become particularly important in marriage, the closest of all human relationships. Love, freedom, responsibility, and protection are the cornerstones of a stable and growing relationship between man and woman.
Something incredible happens, when these ingredients work together. As love grows, spouses become more free from the things that enslave: self-centeredness, sinful patterns, past wounds, and other self-imposed limitations. As a result, they gain a greater sense of self-control and responsibility. Responsibility, again, increases love, and the cycle begins all over again. This is how marriage gets better and better as time goes on, instead of winding down after the excitement of the days of courtship changes into an everyday life together.
The key to all that is that both spouses take responsibility for their own issues instead of just reacting to the other, that they are not afraid of giving freedom to each other, and that they love the other person even when he or she does not deserve it at the time.
But where there is no freedom, there will be slavery and, as a result, rebellion. And where there is no responsibility there will be selfishness and bondage. And where we do not take ownership for what is ours, we will get stuck at a certain level in our relationship and will not be able to go deeper.

Let me illustrate this a by a few examples.

Spouses, who refuse to take ownership for their own feelings and behavior often end up in endless and meaningless arguments about all kinds of unimportant things. The book *Boundaries in Marriage* describes such a situation quite vividly.

> *Caroline and Joe came in for marriage counseling saying that they could not stop arguing with one another. When I asked her, what the arguments were about, Caroline replied, "He is just so angry all the time. He gets so mad at me that it really hurts."*
>
> *I turned to Joe and asked, "Why do you get so mad?".*
>
> *Without having to think for a second, he replied, "Because she always tries to control me and my life."*
>
> *"Why do you try to control him?"*
>
> *"Because he is so into his own things that I can't get his time or attention."*
>
> *"Why don't you pay attention to her?"*
>
> *"Because she is so nagging and controlling – I just have to get away from her."*
>
> *"Why do you nag him?"*
>
> *"Because he won't do anything I want"*

This went on and on and the two didn't even notice the absurdity of their answers. Whenever they were asked "Why do you ...?", their *immediate* answer was always something about the other person. Neither of them ever took ownership of his or her behavior. In their minds, it was always "caused" by the other person.

Blaming somebody else for our own behavior is a sign of great immaturity — and I say this although I am painfully aware of the fact that I fall into that trap myself more often than I want to. On the surface, it seems that we can get rid of the responsibility for our actions by blaming somebody else. But in reality we're just denying ourselves the chance of getting help, because we don't want to admit to ourselves and others that we failed. By putting the blame on our spouse, we hurt the person we love and who would be most willing to help us. But how can you help somebody who is not willing to accept ownership of the problem that needs to be solved?

If, however, we discover who is really responsible for what, we have an opportunity for change. If we learn to answer the question "Why do you ...?" with a "Because *I* ...", we will find out a lot about ourselves and the problems that are ours. That puts us in the driver's seat, because we will learn not just to *react* to our spouse, but to *act* lovingly *no matter what our partner is doing*. We may need to change some attitudes, behaviors, reactions, or choices – maybe even work on our feelings instead of having them control us.

We must *actively* participate in the resolution of whatever relational problem we might have, even if it is not our fault. Responsibility tells us that *we* are the ones who must work through our feelings. *Our* attitudes – not those of our spouse – cause us to feel distressed and helpless. How *we* behave and react is part of the problem. *We* allow ourselves to get pushed beyond certain limits and then become resentful. *We* are the ones who do not turn desires into accomplished goals or cannot let go of sick desires. And *we* – and only we – are the ones who have to initiate the change in *us*. Responsibility empowers us to experience growth in our marriage. But if we refuse it and wait for the other to change first, we will never see any progress.

Another problematic constellation in a marriage occurs if one partner has not become mature in a certain area of life and the other feels obliged to always rescue him or her. Typical examples for this situation are an overspending wife or a husband who doesn't want to help with the housework. The spouse of such a person usually goes through a lot of trouble keeping the family out of debt or the house clean and – as a result – feels severely restricted in his freedom and eventually becomes resentful. The situation is similar with a husband who doesn't want to help with the housework

The problem here is not just the immaturity of one spouse, but also the fact that the other one *allows himself* to become a victim of such a behavior actually enables it out of fear that setting limits would endanger the relationship. However, while setting limits might cause a temporary stir that we have to endure, the lack of freedom that we experience from *not* setting limits will prevent our relationship from going deeper.

Finally, there is the aspect of protection. Boundaries shall guard the good and not let evil destroy it. Sadly enough, in some marriages – even in Christian ones – the protective boundaries have to be raised against your own spouse because of an abusive situation. If the abused spouse takes on the role of the silent sufferer and waits for a miraculous change in the other one, the situation will usually get worse, as love grows colder and colder. If you want to save such a marriage, you can't allow your spouse to abuse you. If he does not experience the consequences of his behavior, the chances for a change are very slim. I am not talking about a divorce here – that is not an option – but about firm limits that protect yourself, your children, and ultimately your marriage from a destructive cycle.
In **1. Corinthians 5:3–6** Paul gives a similar recommendation for dealing with a man who refuses to let go of a severe sin:

> For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?

Letting the sinner experience the full consequences of his sin may be the last chance to save him. If you stop enabling him, he may wake up, realize what he is doing, and eventually repent. This is what true love is – tough love in this case – because you do what is best for him and not what he likes. I know that it is very difficult to find the appropriate measure and you shouldn't attempt this without a lot of prayer and counseling. But if you do set limits, the chances for saving your marriage and rekindling the first love are much higher than if you don't.

Responsibility, freedom, and protection are necessary for a stable and growing relationship. Love can only exist where these ingredients are operating. But where love can grow, it creates more freedom that leads to more responsibility, which in turn leads to more and more ability to love and a much deeper relationship.

2.4 What is within the Boundaries?

So far we have discussed the nature of boundaries and their role in developing healthy relationships. However, in order to be able to take ownership for what is is ours, we must identify what is within our boundaries. What are the things for which only we are responsible? What is it that only we can control and protect?

Feelings have gotten a bad reputation in the Christian world. They have been called anything from unimportant to fleshly, because feelings so often turn out to be a stumbling block in our walk with God. Sometimes the cause us to do some very stupid things that we would never have done in a clear mind.

But feelings can also motivate us to do good where common sense might have kept us from doing so. The Good Samaritan's compassion, as described in **Luke 10:33**, moved him to help the injured Israelite. The prodigal son's father was filled with compassion for his lost son **(Luke 15:20)**. Jesus so often was filled with compassion for the people around him **Matthew 9:36, 15:32**.

Feelings come from our heart and tell us something about the state of our relationships. Positive feelings indicate that things probably go well, negative ones – like anger, depression, or hurt – show us that there is a problem that must be addressed. Feelings should never be ignored – nor should they be allowed to have control over us. Instead, *we are responsible for our feelings*. They are our problem, not that of others, and we have to find the answer to whatever they are pointing to.

Attitudes and Beliefs. Attitudes have to do with our orientation towards life, God, relationship, other people, work etc., while beliefs are what we accept as truth. We develop attitudes and beliefs at a very early stage in our life and and often fail to question them when we grow up. As a result, both our attitudes and beliefs can be the source of great discomfort in our life, because we hold the tradition of man **(Mark 7:8)** instead of the commandments of God **(Matthew 15:3)**.

Many people with attitude problems believe that it is wrong to hold people responsible for their feelings, choices, and behaviors (God's view is expressed in **Proverbs 13:18,24**). Therefore they tend to blame others for the consequences of their own actions – an attitude that goes back to the very beginnings of mankind. In **Genesis 3:11–13** we read

> And God said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat

But God doesn't listen to such lame excuses. He holds each person responsible for what he or she does – regardless of what others did. He punishes the serpent, Eve, and Adam. Listen to what he says in **Genesis 3:17**:

> And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life

Yes Adam, I see that your wife gave you the fruit of the tree to eat – but the fact that she failed to obey my command is no excuse for what you did.

Our attitudes and convictions fall within *our* property line. We are the ones who will feel their effect and we are the only ones who can change them. Others may have influenced them, but the responsibility is ours.

Values determine what we love and how important it is for us. They determine the priorities we have, for instance whether we value the approval of other people higher than the approval of God; or whether we value riches, power, and a pleasant life higher than spiritual values or relationships.

If we value things that have no lasting value, we will pursue many things that will not satisfy us but only give us a desire for more. We only want a little more of what we desire, and believe that we will be content once we get it. But we will never get there, because our heart always asks for more.

Only when we take responsibility for our values and ask ourselves "are these the values that I want to have", we can realize the futility of such an attempt and confess that we have a heart that values the wrong things. Only then we are ready to receive help from God to "create a new heart" within us.

Thoughts. Minds and thoughts are what distinguishes human beings from the rest of the creation. They make us able to accomplish great things, but can also be a source of pain and destruction. Therefore the Bible reminds us to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ (**2. Corinthians 10:5**). Establishing boundaries for our thoughts involves three things.

1. First of all have to *own our thoughts*, that is we must learn to develop our own thoughts instead of just reiterating what others say. Many people have not started their own thinking process even at the age of 50. They swallow other's opinions and reasonings without questioning at all what is being said, particularly when it is written in a newspaper, said on TV, or preached from the pulpit. Certainly we need to listen to the thoughts of others and weigh them, but we must not give our minds to somebody else. How many people have been led astray by political leaders, tabloids, TV shows, and – sadly enough – fallen preachers just because they were too lazy to detect the obvious flaws in what they had been told?
2. *We must grow in knowledge*, particularly in the knowledge of God and his word. Most of us understand the need for learning when it comes to our professional life. But it even more important when it comes to life as such. Only when we continue to learn about God from his Word and by what we observe in his world, will be be able to use our minds responsibly, and make decisions that we won't regret later. Paul says in **1. Corinthians 13:11**:

   > When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

3. We also must *clarify distorted thinking*. We all have a tendency to think and perceive certain things in distorted ways, especially when it comes to relationships. Our perception of other people are distorted by past relationships and our own preconceptions of *who we think* they are. We cannot see them clearly because of the logs in *our* eyes, and often suspect bad things that are simply not there. In **(Matthew 7:3–5)** Jesus gives us a warning:

   > And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

   Taking ownership of our minds and thoughts means checking out whether we may be wrong, instead of believing that we are always right in our judgment of other people. As we gather new information our thinking adapts and grows closer to reality.

Taking ownership of our thoughts also means that we are responsible for communicating them to others. Some people believe that their spouses should be able to read their minds and know what they want. But this only leads to frustration. I have never ever met a person who can truly read the mind of anybody else. The Bible clearly says that this is impossible.

> For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? **(1. Corinthians 2:11)**.

Your thoughts are your own. If you expect your husband or wife to know them, you have to tell them.

Behaviors have consequences. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap **(Galatians 6:7–8)**. This is not a threat but a "natural" law. If we study, we will learn a lot. If we go to work, we will get paid. If we act lovingly, we will have closer relationships. On the negative side, we can expect failure, poverty, or a lot of problems as consequences of irresponsibility, idleness or lack of self-control. Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path **(Proverbs 15:10)**.

The problem is, that people have always tried to break out of this natural law of sowing and reaping. And apparently some succeeded in doing so. But this can only happen if someone interrupts the law in another's life. A lazy, selfish, or pleasure-seeking person *should* experience the consequences of his behavior. But parents often protect their children from actually reaping these consequences. As adults, these children will have severe problems taking control of their life. They do not understand that their problems are just the natural consequences of their behavior and not caused by some bad luck or by people who "don't like them".

We must learn to accept the responsibility for our behavior. No one else can control it, but we can.

Choices, like behaviors, are entirely under our control. We are the ones who make them and we are the ones who have to bear the consequences. Throughout the Bible we are reminded of the fact that we are responsible for the choices we make **(Deuteronomy 30:19, Joshua 24:15)**. But often we don't like to accept the consequences of our choices. In **Matthew 20:13**, for instance, a worker gets angry about receiving only the wage for which he had agreed to work, because others apparently had gotten a better deal.

In today's life, we often try to disown our choice by saying "I had to" or "I cannot", instead of honestly stating "I decided to" or "I do not want". We try to push the responsibility for our choices to somebody else or to the circumstances. As a result, we often feel pressed into making decisions that we don't like. God doesn't want that. In **2. Corinthians 9:7** Paul writes

> Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

It may be easier to follow the trend or the people around us, just because we won't stand out so much then. But this will certainly not give us the fulfilled life we desire. Whether we feel it or not, we have to realize that *we* are in control of our choices. If we do so, we will make fewer decisions that we will later regret, and more choices that we will be happy with on the long run.

Limits are commonly misunderstood as *setting limits on others*. In reality, this is not possible. We can't set limits on other people because we lack the power to do make them behave "right".

We can and have to, however, set limits on our own exposure to other people.[2] This is necessary both for our own protection against evil influences and for the protection of our own freedom. Our model is God. He doesn't use his power to make us "behave", but he certainly separates himself from sinful people. As long as they don't repent, there is no space for them in heaven. Scripture tells us to do the same, that is to limit our exposure to sinful people. In **Matthew 18:15–17** we read

> Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

In the same way Paul writes in **1. Corinthians 5:11**

> But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.

[2] This includes our exposure to television (e.g. soap operas), which presents an ungodly lifestyle as normal way of life.

and in **2. Corinthians 6:17**

> Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.

Separation doesn't mean we consider ourselves to be "above" these people or that we don't even talk to them anymore. But it does limit their influence on us.

In the same way, we need to *set proper limits on ourselves* to protect ourselves from being controlled by desires, feelings, impulsive reactions etc, without having to suppress these entirely. We need spaces inside ourselves where feelings, desires, impulses, etc. can exist freely. But we must limit the extent to which we are acting them out. Most people in this country have severe difficulties with that and therefore fall into one or the other extreme. Worldly people tend to give in to their feelings and desires too quickly, Christians tend to suppress them completely – both does not lead to a healthy, balanced life. What we need is *self-control without repression* and we are the only ones who can make that happen.

Talents. No passage illustrates the need for a responsible use of our talents better than **Matthew 25:22–28**

> He also that had received two talents came and said,Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them.His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.
>
> Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

Our talents are clearly within our boundaries. Yet, taking ownership of them is often frightening and sometimes risky. Nevertheless, God holds us accountable for what we do with them. Are we exercising our gift and being productive – or do we hide our talents because we fear failure? God wants us to *use* our talents. If we do not confront our fear of failure and practice, learn, and try the best we can, we insult the one who gave us our talents, that is God.

However, we have to use our gifts wisely. There is no use in trying to accomplish things that God didn't intend us to do. Don't take on *any* task just to make sure that you will not be called "lazy" – because then you will surely miss out on the things that God really wanted you to do. It is a question of proper balance.

Desires. Each of us has different wishes, dreams, goals and plans that aim at satisfying some desire in us. Yet we observe that only few people around us are truly satisfied. This is partly due to the fact that we can't define what desire we are trying to please with what we do and therefore direct our attention to what seems most obvious. James describes this problem in **James 4:2–3**

> Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

We confuse pleasures and lust with desires and needs that fulfill us and spend a lot of energy on pursuing things that we don't really need and don't give us true satisfaction.

God is truly interested in our desires. He has made them and He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him (**Psalm 145:19**).[3] God gives generously, but like any wise parent, he wants to make sure that his gifts are right for us. He doesn't give us something that only feeds our pride or enhances our ego. But if we ask for what is good for us, he is very interested (see **Matthew 7:7–10**).

We are responsible for our desires. We need to find out what our desires are and what really satisfies us. These desires are our own and probably very different from those of others. We need to pursue *these* desires and distinguish them from what what does not satisfy us. **Proverbs 13:19** says:

> A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.

If we want to find fulfillment in life, we can't wait for others to bring that to us – we have to work on it ourselves.

Spiritual Needs are one particular form of desires. When we take a close look into our soul we will find a deep desire for spirituality, that is a close contact with God. A close walk with God is not our duty, but a desire that needs to be filled, lest we want to experience emptiness in our soul. Sadly enough, however, many of us we will also discover that we neglect this need and take care of other, less important things that seem to be more urgent.

Filling our spiritual need is our own responsibility. Nobody else can do that for us – not our pastor, not our Sunday School teacher, and not even our spouse. These people may be able to give us advice and assistance, but in the end our relationship with God depends solely on us. We are the ones who need to find time for communicating with God in a way that we actually enjoy.

Love. Our ability to give and receive love is the very center of our being. But many people have difficulty giving or accepting love because of hurt and fear. Their heart is closed to others and inside is a lot of emptiness and loneliness.

[3] See also **Psalm 37:4** Delight thyself also in the LORD: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart and **Psalm 21:2**: Thou hast given him his heart's desire, and hast not withholden the request of his lips.

The bible tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our heart needs an *inflow as well as an outflow of love*. If we haven't exercised this, we feel weak in the same way our body would feel weak due to a lack of physical exercise. We need to take responsibility for our heart and train it to give love and to respond to the love that others desire to give us. If we don't, we will feel terribly lonely even in the most loving environment.

Our body is obviously within our boundaries as well. It defines the physical part of our person, the one that we most obviously own. But, according to **1. Corinthians 6:19** it is also the temple of the Holy Spirit, and be used for glorifying God. Therefore, it is our responsibility to take care of our body. Apart from making sure that it will not be defiled by sexual sins, we also have to keep it healthy and in shape, instead of neglecting or mistreating it.

This means, for instance, that we should eat properly – make sure that we give our body the nutrition it needs and not just junk food. Yes, we have the right to enjoy all the good things that God provided for our body on this earth, but we shouldn't eat, drink, or smoke substances that are damaging to your body. And in particular, we should not overfeed it. In this country, where 55% of the population is overweight and 1/4 of all adults are considered obese, we have to be especially aware of the seduction of food and physical laziness.

So we should make sure that our body gets proper exercise. It will be thankful for that 20 years later. But on the other hand we must not abuse our body by putting unreasonable loads on it. A man of 150 pounds may be able to lift 200 pounds regularly for whatever purpose when he is young, but trying the same at the age of 40 may create lasting damages.

Also, we shouldn't use pain relievers on a regular basis without seeing a doctor. Pain is usually an indicator that something is wrong. If we suppress these warning signals and keep on with unhealthy habits, we may seriously damage our health.

We could go on and on. Usually common sense will tell us what is beneficial for our body and what is not. But the demands of today's society often create situations where we act against our common sense.

God may not have given you the same healthy, strong body as others. But if you take care of what you do have, you will be able to enjoy it much better.

For all the above areas we need to take responsibility if we want to have a balanced and healthy life. They lie within *our* boundaries and, apart from giving us some help, nobody else can take care of them. Taking care of what is inside our boundaries is not easy. In fact, setting and maintaining boundaries is hard work. But it is a type of work that leads to spiritual growth, deeper relationships, and a much more satisfied life.

2.5 Examples of Boundaries

How then, do we protect our invisible property lines? What are the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual means we can use to set boundaries and exercise limits? Let us look at a few examples.

Skin. The most obvious boundary of our person is our physical skin. It is the first boundary we experience that separates us from others. It protects bones, muscles, blood, etc. and holds it together while keeping germs outside. Nevertheless, it has openings to let the good – that is food, drink, light, etc. inside.

A violation of our physical boundary is what we experience strongest. Victims of physical abuse often have lost their sense for boundaries. They are especially vulnerable because their property has been invaded early in life, and they don't know what proper boundaries are.

Words are the clearest way in which you can communicate your invisible boundaries to other people. The most basic boundary-setting word is *no*, a word that children should learn at an early stage in their life. It lets other know that you exist apart from them and that you are in control of yourself. In **Matthew 5:37** and **James 5:12** God explicitly tells us to make use of this boundary.

No is a confrontational word, which makes it difficult for some people to use. They fear that confrontations will endanger their relationship with other people and rather give in to the control or demands of others. But the Bible says that we should confront the people we love and tell them "This behavior is not okay and I will not participate in that." Many passages, like **Matthew 18:15–17**, urge us to say no to other's sinful treatment of us. Complying with what is going on "for the sake of peace" is just the opposite of love. If we desire a healthy relationship with our spouse, we have to learn to *use* boundary-setting words and to *accept* them as well. Do we actually do that?

However, we also have to let other people know, where we stand and, what we believe, what we like, and what we want. If we don't use words to define our property, other people will find it difficult to know who we are and what we like and dislike. Don't expect that they see this without you telling them.

Truth. Knowing the truth about the world around you and living according to it is essential for a healthy life. After several fruitless attempts to overcome the law of gravity, you will accept it as unchangeable reality and do not expect to float in the air when you fall of a mountain cliff – so you pay attention where you walk. In the same way, realizing the truth of God's unchangeable reality helps you to define yourself in relation to him.

When you read that and that a man reaps what he sows **(Galatians 6:7)** you can either accept that and consider the consequences of your plans and actions, or try to go your own way and get injured. When you read that you

- shall not lie
- shall not commit adultery
- shall not covet
- should give to others
- should love one another
- should be compassionate
- should not judge others but forgive

you may live by theses truths and experience growth in your relationships, or ignore them and fail. Many people have tried to live outside their God-given boundaries, not accepting who they are, and live tumultuous, peaceless lives. Living in truth, however, provides a great deal of safety.

In addition to accepting God's truth, it is necessary to be honest and truthful about ourselves. Otherwise we give others a false impression of who we are and how their actions affect us. For instance, if a wife gets hurt by her husband's behavior and she acts happy and loving, he will not find out that he did something wrong and that in reality she is feeling miserable inside. Her insincerity causes more damage to the marriage than his behavior. Paul writes in **Ephesians 4:25**

> Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.

If we're not truthful with each other, our real relationship will go into hiding. On the surface, everything will appear to be fine, but intimacy is lost, and so is love.

Have you ever become aware of giving your spouse a false impression of your feelings or your perspective on the relationship? If so, you should ask yourself *why* you chose to do so and whether the long-term consequences were actually beneficial for your marriage.

Physical Distance. Another boundary is best expressed by a small riddle:

When an accident happens – what is better than presence of mind?

Absence of body, is the surprising answer, but it is obviously true. Sometimes the best way to protect yourself is physically removing yourselves from a dangerous situation. It helps you stay out of trouble if you're not together with friends who could seduce you to do some pretty stupid things, or protects you from being abused. **Proverbs 27:12** says

> A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished.

In a marriage, physical distance helps you to remove yourself from an argument in order to cool down, recover your senses, and to sort things out before you get together again. But make sure that the latter actually happens, since otherwise the physical distance may lead to a separation between you and your spouse.

Getting away from others also gives you an opportunity to replenish yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually after you have given to your limit. Jesus often went into solitude for that reason and from time to time we need to do the same – both as individuals and as couples.

Married couples, in particular parents need times where they are just by themselves – without children, family members, or friends – to build up their relationship, sort out mistakes from the past, and create new ways relating to each other. **Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5–7** says

> To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
>
> a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

Life doesn't always stay the same. Occasionally, we just need to take some time off to regain ownership over some aspect of our life and to consider whether some of our ways need to be changed or at least be adjusted.

Emotional Distance is a boundary that should be used with some care. It is a temporary boundary that shall give your heart the space it needs to be safe in certain situations. *Never ever should it become a permanent way of living.* People who have been in abusive relationships or whose trust has been broken severely may need to guard their hearts until the problem has been worked out. **Proverbs 4:23** says

> Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

You should not continue to set yourself up for hurt and disappointment by blindly trusting a spouse who has repeatedly broken your trust. That doesn't mean you shouldn't forgive, but you may have to say things like

- *I love you, but I don't trust you. I can't be close until we work this out.*
- *We can be close again, when you can be kind to me.*
- *We can be close again, when you are serious about getting help.*

Emotional distance may be the most prudent thing until a situation is completely resolved because it prevents further hurt and disappointment. How many marriages, where one spouse had broken faith, could have been saved if the other one had kept an emotional distance and given her heart some time to heal?

Emotional distance, however, should not be confused with revenge. It must be a conscious, carefully weighed, and talked-about choice. Most of all it requires a pure heart to make sure that this boundary serves love and not some impure motives in us. Otherwise, it will only make the conflict worse instead of resolving it.

Consequences. Trespassing on other people's property usually carries consequences. The Bible teaches this principle over and over: if we overstep God's boundaries, there will be consequences – one of the best known being **Romans 6:23**

> For the wages of sin is death

Just as the Bible sets consequences for certain behaviors (cf. **Deuteronomy 30:15–20**), we need to back up our boundaries with consequences – otherwise people will find out that they can overstep them whenever they want to. In an ideal world, people would accept your boundaries without any threat of consequences. But parents are painfully aware of the fact that children usually do not accept boundaries if they are not "enforced". It is the very nature of children to test their limits and your seriousness about certain boundaries. And many adults are not much better in that respect.

If you experience that your boundaries are not respected you need to announce consequences and – even more important – follow through with them. How many young adult lives could have been turned around if parents had followed through with their threat "no more money if you quit another job without further employment". How many marriages could have been saved if one spouse had followed through with the threat "if you don't stop drinking (or hitting me), I will leave you until you get some treatment!". Sometimes the consequences appear severe, but they may be necessary if there is no other way to deal with a serious trespass. In **2. Thessalonians 3:10** Paul commands

> if any would not work, neither should he eat.

God does not enable irresponsible behavior and we shouldn't do this either. Of course, the consequences for trespassing a boundary should be appropriate and never be a revenge for bad behavior. For instance, you may

- refuse to bail someone out of a jam because of perpetual irresponsibility, like not completing work on time,
- start eating dinner without your husband if he is late for the 1000th time,
- leave the room if a conversation turns to become abusive,
- cancel a joint credit card and have separate ones issued if your wife continues overspending — and refuse to pay her credit card bills.

However, we have to keep in mind that consequences need to be announced in time to give the other a chance to change. This is what God had in mind with the city of Niniveh, when he announced its destruction in the book of **Jonah**. Because the people changed he did not have to follow through with his threat anymore. The purpose of a consequence is to let people know the seriousness of the trespass, not to punish them. This teaches them that we are committed to live according to helpful values, which we will protect and guard.

Other People. Trying to set boundaries all by ourselves is a difficult thing to do. In some situations we may need the support of others to set, and more importantly to maintain boundaries. This is particularly important when we face problems in our relationships. The fear of being alone and not having any love in our lives makes us accept hurtful patterns that destroy our love for our spouse. There are several ways in which others can help.

Friends can help us to resolve conflicts. Counselors and pastors can give us new input and teaching that helps us to work on difficult issues. In support groups we can find healing and strength. And in extreme cases third parties can offer us shelter and help us find to protect and support ourselves.

Most importantly, other people are there to let us know that we are not alone and that our spouse are not the only source of love in the world. However, we have to make sure that other people are helping and not adding to the problem by intruding into our relationship. The purpose of seeking other people is not to hide or run away from the conflict but to resolve it.

2.6 Common Boundary Myths

By now we should have understood that setting boundaries is important both for the development of individual persons and for growth in a relationship. Nevertheless, many Christians have severe difficulties with setting and maintaining boundaries, partially because they believe boundaries to be directed against all a Christian values and partially because they are afraid of the consequences. Therefore we have to deal with some common myths about boundaries, that sound so true but nevertheless have little to do with reality.

1. **If I set boundaries, I am being selfish.**

   This objection against setting boundaries is raised by Christians who fear being considered as self-centered, interested only in their own concerns and not those of others. They rightly point out that we are to be loving people, concerned for the welfare of others. In fact, the love for one another is the number one hallmark of Christians, as pointed out in the Bible over and over again (**Matthew 19:19 & 22:19, Luke 10:27, John 13:35, Romans 13:10, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8**). Don't boundaries turn us away from that ideal toward self-centeredness?

   Quite the opposite is true. Appropriate boundaries actually make us able to care about others. In fact, people with highly developed limits are the most caring people in the world. How can this be?

   Basically it is because they experience that their own needs are taken care of, so they have plenty of energy to care about others.

   We all have needs, desires, and wishes. *Selfishness* only looks at our own wishes and desires, but not at what we really *need*. As a consequence, we lose balance and our focus on healthy goals and our responsibility to love others. For instance, some may desperately need help with the fact that they are terrible listeners or that they cannot share their possessions. But they may not desire this. God is much more interested in meeting our needs than granting all our wishes.

> But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. **(Philippians 4:19)**

That doesn't mean our wishes are "all bad". God will meet many of them but they are certainly less important.

Nevertheless, although God takes care of our need, he expects our participation. It is our responsibility to ask, seek, and knock **(Matthew 7:7)**, before we can receive, find, and get doors opened. There will be little spiritual and emotional growth if we do not bring our needs before God and do everything we can to get these needs fulfilled. Taking care of our own life is *stewardship*, not selfishness, because because we properly manage this precious gift from God instead of neglecting it due to a lack of boundaries.

2. **Boundaries are a sign of disobedience and unsubmissiveness.**

   Quite a few Christians fear that setting and keeping limits is a signal of rebellion and disobedience. They believe that saying no to something good is an expression of an unresponsive heart, so they participate in almost every Church activity that comes along. But in fact, doing so has no genuine spiritual or emotional value. If we don't give freely and cheerfully but rather out of a sense of duty, our heart is not in it and this is not what God wants (recall **2. Corinthians 9:7**).

   What do we achieve with complying outwardly while becoming resentful on the inside? What is the value of a half-hearted *yes* where we would love to say *no* but are afraid to do so? God is much more concerned with our heart than with our outward compliance.

   > For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings **(Hosea 6:6)**

   Outwardly saying *yes* when we really mean *no* is the same as lying. There will be no blessing on what we do then, because we do it half-hearted anyway. It is better not to do it at all.

   Can boundaries be a sign of disobedience? They sure are, if we say no to good things for wrong and selfish reasons, and therefore we should always check our motives for saying no. But a *lack* of boundaries is even worse, because it leads to dishonesty and resentment and ultimately to disobedience and rebellion.

3. **Boundaries mean that I am angry.**

   When people begin setting boundaries, telling the truth, and taking responsibility for the first time, they often seem to be surrounded by an "angry cloud". As they become more sensitive to situations where boundaries are not respected, they discover that they have become touchy and easily offended and that confuses and frightens them. We may experience that as one of the early results of this study.

So, do boundaries cause anger in us? Absolutely not. If we see it that way, we misunderstand our emotions, and anger specifically. Emotions are signals that are supposed to tell us something. For instance, fear tells us to move away from danger, while anger urges us to confront a threat. A biblical example of how this feeling works is Jesus' rage at the defilement of the temple in **John 2:14–17**.

Angry feelings serve as a warning system, telling us that we are in danger of being injured, controlled, or manipulated. That's why we get so angry at telemarketers. But that is not all. While fear tells us to withdraw (because it is better to do so), anger gives us the energy to move forward and protect what needs to protected.

However, anger doesn't just disappear when the danger is over. It needs to be worked through appropriately. Otherwise it stays within us for years. It is the anger of years of nos that were never said, never respected, and never listened to, which surfaces when we first look at boundary violations that we never knew to exist before. We shouldn't be surprised if we detect this in ourselves and there is no reason to be frightened of these feelings.

Of course, we shouldn't just let them out. Instead we should bring them to God so that we may be healed instead of keeping all that hostility buried in our souls. Only then can we begin to protect our treasures in a proper way, that is firmly but without negative emotions. The more biblical our boundaries become, the less anger will we experience. We don't need anger if we are in control of our life and values and see our needs met.

4. **If I begin setting boundaries, I will be hurt by others.**

   Setting boundaries with people who don't like limitations is always complicated. Many people don't like it when we present different opinions and arguments. They may become angry at us and attack or withdraw from us. Even Jesus had to deal with that, for instance in **Matthew 19:16–22** when he had to let a rich young man go away, or during his permanent conflicts with the Pharisees.

   Does that mean we should treat people softer just because they hate limits? Should we refrain from telling the truth and rather twist it a bit to make it easier to swallow? Is it more important for us that all people love us than living in truth? Jesus says in **Luke 6:26**:

   > Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets.

   There are people in the world who love the truth and and accept limits, because they realize the chance for growth. But others resent differences, try to manipulate us into giving up our boundaries, and reject us if we don't. If we try to please all people, including those who hate boundaries, we will end up bending the truth. Jesus says in **Luke 6:27** that we should do good to those who hate us. But that does not mean we should do everything they want.

But what, if that boundary-hating person is our own spouse? Shall we comply just to keep the peace in our relationship? Or should we rather endure his or her bad temper and even risk that he or she walks out on us? We may have to risk that if we want our relationship to survive. If we give in all the time our relationship will become more and more shallow and distant. It is better to discover the true character of our spouse and take steps to fix the problem than to leave the problem unresolved.

Will we get hurt for setting boundaries? Very likely! But if our boundaries are being rooted in love **(Ephesians 3:18)**, there is a good chance that our relationship will eventually become much deeper and and closer than ever before.

5. **If I set boundaries, I will hurt others.**

   Occasionally setting boundaries will result in disappointing other people whom we value and like to see happy.

   - A friend may want to borrow a car when we need it ourselves.
   - People in church may call us for support when we are in bad shape ourselves and cannot help.
   - A relative may be in a desperate financial situation but you can loan him anything without endangering your own family's security.

   Shouldn't we help these people anyway? Don't we hurt others by setting boundaries? It depends on how we see boundaries. Do we view them as offensive weapon and setting boundaries as attacking and hurting people?

   Nothing could be further from the truth. Boundaries are a defensive tool that prevent our treasures to be taken at the wrong time and for the wrong purpose. Saying no to others may cause them some discomfort, because they have to look elsewhere. But it does not cause injury.

   It is not our responsibility to get the need of others met. We can and shall do so freely if we have the resources and don't enable irresponsibility. But we don't have the duty to take the daily load of everybody else. Even when someone has a valid problem, there may be times when we have to send them away because there are more important things that we need to take care of. Again, we should take Jesus as our example. Although he performed many miracles, he didn't heal everybody who was sick. He often withdrew from the crowd to be alone with the father (see, e.g. **Matthew 14:22–23**). In certain cases, we must allow others to take responsibility for their own loads and look elsewhere to get their needs met, or to deal with them themselves.

Obviously, we may also be the ones who get turned down. That is why we should develop several supportive relationships instead of having just God and one best friend. That allows our friends to be human, to be busy or unavailable at times, to have problems of their own, or just to have time alone. They don't become enslaved by us, if know that we can go to someone else.

6. **Boundaries are difficult to accept**

   Some people have difficulties with setting boundaries because of bad experiences with boundaries that were set on them. Having to accept the boundaries of others is certainly not pleasant, because no one really enjoys hearing the word no. But why is it sometimes such a big problem to accept boundaries?

   - We may have been *injured by inappropriate boundaries in the past*, particularly during childhood. The younger a child, the fewer places it has to go to get its emotional and psychological needs met. Parents who ignore these needs and say no at the wrong times for the wrong reasons can create in their children a deep sense of being unwanted, which will follow them into adulthood and surface every time they hear the word no.

     Raising emotionally healthy and balanced children is not easy because we can create a lot of damage both by lacking boundaries or by setting them wrongly. We will all fail our children to a certain extent, and probably all of us have already discovered where our parents failed us. But the good news is that the past injuries don't have to stay within us. We can bring them to God and he will heal us.
   - People who have been hurt by inappropriate childhood boundaries often tend to disown the bad feeling and *project* it onto others. Sensing their own pain in others, they will avoid setting limits on others, as they imagine how devastating it would be to them. Little do they know what really causes pain in others because they never doubt that other's feelings could be different from their own.

     We should never project our own feelings onto our children or assume that we know exactly how our spouse feels. It is an insult to their individuality. Regardless how well we know them, they are still different from us.
   - An inability to receive somebody else's boundary, particularly in a marriage, may also have to do with an *idolatrous relationship to your spouse*. If your emotional well-being depends solely on his or her being there for you at all times, then something in this relationship is severely out of balance.

     Although we certainly need each other, no one but God is indispensable. If we consider one significant person to be responsible for giving us everything we need, if we view him or her as the only source of good in the world and fall into despair whenever there is a conflict with that person, then we put him or her on a throne that should only be occupied by God.

We should never do that, because it hurts our spiritual and emotional freedom and development. Essentially you have given the control of your life and the responsibility for it to your spouse. Just imagine that person would die tonight in a car accident – where would you go? It is your responsibility to develop more than just one deep, significant relationship and give your spouse the freedom to say no to you without guilt.

- Finally, an inability to accept boundaries may indicate a *problem in taking responsibility.* Sometimes people become so accustomed to others rescuing them from whatever problem they fall in, that they actually believe that the responsibility for their own well-being is somebody else's problem. Thus they feel let down and unloved, when they are not bailed out.

Can we be hurt by somebody else setting boundaries on us? This is certainly possible, but not necessarily bad, if it helps us to grow by correcting something that needs to be fixed. In **2. Corinthians 7:8–9** Paul writes

> For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.

Apparently the Corinthians accepted and responded well to boundaries that caused pain for them, because they knew them to be beneficial.

7. **Boundaries cause feelings of guilt.**

One of the major obstacles to setting boundaries with others in our lives is our feeling of obligation. Don't we owe a lot to our parents and anyone else who has been loving towards us? So how can we ever say no to them when they are in need? Don't we then abuse their generosity?

Saying no to someone who has been kind to us is difficult, because it stirs up feelings of guilt. We feel that *because we have received something we now owe something.* Nothing could be more wrong than that. If we receive something as gift – love, money, efforts, or time – we should accept it as what it is: a gift with no obligations. All that is really needed is gratitude for something that was provided out of love. Period!

But many people have their difficulties with free gifts. They believe that they always have to give something in return. And so they never leave home, never switch jobs or friends, and never change churches even when it would be an otherwise mature move. In extreme cases people don't even want to accept gifts anymore because they don't have the time or money for a return gift. This is really twisted thinking. Free gifts are to be accepted with thankfulness, not with a feeling of debt.

Actually, the commercial world uses the fact that so many people have difficulties to accept free gifts as part of a marketing strategy. They first offer you something for free and after you have taken it, they ask you to buy their products. And we fall into that trap because the person who gave us that gift "went through so many efforts". Is that our problem? The gift was free and we have no obligation whatsoever for taking it.

Of course, there are always people who do not give selflessly but only for the purpose of getting something from us. You can always tell the difference by how they react to your sincere thanks. If the giver is hurt or angered, then the gift was not intended to be a gift but a loan or investment. If the gratitude is enough, you probably received a gift with no strings attached.

In **Revelation 2** God does an instructive job of keeping the issues of gratitude and boundaries separate. In the letters to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira he begins by praising their accomplishments, then tells that that nevertheless he has something against them, and finally confronts their irresponsibilities. He doesn't allow his boundaries to be nullified by his gratitude and neither should we.

8. **Boundaries separate me from others.**

   Some people have difficulties setting boundaries because they are afraid of being *different* from others or even becoming a social "outcast". Thus they avoid everything that makes them appear separate from others.

   Although "going with the crowd" appears to make life easier it also makes us give up our individuality. But that is not the way God designed us. He has put a lot of work into each of us (**Psalms 139:14**). He has given us a free will and the responsibility to make the choices that determine our life ourselves. God does not want us to become mere puppets of somebody else or to become undistinguishable from the environment. This becomes quite obvious in **2. Corinthians 6:14–18**, where Paul talks about our relation to unbelievers.

   > Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

   There are clearly situations where we have to be different from others even if that means that our distinguishing features become quite visible. In **Matthew**

5:13-16 Jesus challenges us to accept our role as *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*. We can't go into hiding by "blending in".

Do boundaries make us different? They sure do. But most people will eventually respect and even appreciate that you take a stand on things instead of being undistinguishable from everybody else.

9. **Boundaries are permanent and result in burning my bridges.**

   Many people fear that a boundary once set cannot be removed anymore and thus creates a permanent gap between them and others. So they are afraid of losing friends by creating boundaries.

   But boundaries are set by us and completely under our control. We can and have to adjust our boundaries once we know that our property line will be respected. There are many biblical precedents for renegotiated boundaries. For instance, God chose not to destroy Niniveh when the city repented **(Jonah 3:10)**, and Paul requested Mark's companionship in **2. Timothy 4:11** although 2 years earlier he had refused to take him on his mission trip **(Acts 15:37–39)**, because at that time Mark had not been reliable enough.

   Boundaries do not prevent closeness. On the contrary, they lead to maturity and eventually to much closer relationships between us and others. We may experience that immature people temporarily become distant when we set boundaries. We may even lose some so-called friends who cannot accept boundaries. But these friendships wouldn't have been beneficial for us anyway.

All the above myths are genuine misconceptions. We may have learned from distorted teachings or developed them ourselves because of our fear of standing up and saying no to unbiblical "responsibility". If we find ourselves ensnared and entangled by them, we should prayerfully review our value system, compare it to God's truth, and ask God to adjust it according to his will.