

12 Measuring Success with Boundaries

In all the previous chapters we have talked about the importance of boundaries for personal growth, resolving conflicts, and increasing love in our relationships. We have looked at a variety of situations and suggested practical ways for establishing appropriate boundaries. However, the path from a life without boundaries to one where our boundaries are mature is neither short nor easy, as it requires fundamental adjustments to our way of thinking and our attitude towards God, ourselves, and other people. Most of all, we have to flesh out the general guidelines presented here and to apply them to our specific situation.

Some people get discouraged on the way, as it takes them much longer than they expected. They see no progress and begin to believe that boundaries don't work after all, because real life is different from what is described here. Or they believe that boundaries are a good thing in principle but that they are just not capable of establishing them.

For those people there is hope. Success with boundaries is not an issue of yes or no, but a continuous change in our life. It is possible to measure these changes and to see which step you have already gone and which steps are still ahead of you. The following eleven stages will help you determine where you are in the development and to guide the next step in your growth.

12.1 Anger – our early-warning signal when boundaries are violated

The first sign that you are beginning to develop boundaries is usually a sense of resentment, frustration, and even anger at the violations in your life. You didn't notice it before, but people are overstepping your boundaries and now your anger alerts you of these things.

Some Christians, being afraid that anger is sin or could damage their relationship to other people, have buried this anger so deeply inside themselves that they don't feel it anymore. But people who cannot get angry at all when they are being manipulated, controlled, or violated in other ways have a severe handicap. Like a person infected with leprosy, they lack the early warning signals that usually tell them that something is severely wrong. They don't feel the pain, so they don't notice that some damage is done to them until the damage is so big that they can't overlook it anymore. Anger is a natural thing – even the Lord became angry (**Exodus 4:14, Numbers 32:13, Deuteronomy 29:27**). Anger flares up like a fire inside you, letting you know that there is a problem that needs to be confronted.

As you learn to look truthfully at what happens around you, you may discover this anger for the first time. This is a good sign – don't be afraid of it. Give yourself permission to feel angry when you are being controlled by others. That doesn't mean you should lash out in anger (**Ephesians 4:26**), but you should welcome these

unpleasant feelings as a friend – an early-warning signal that finally is working.

If you realize that you even don't allow yourself to be angry, now is a good time to start. Work on finding a safe place to tell the truth, even unpleasant ones. As you learn to become more honest about differences and disagreements, you will become able to allow your anger help you.

12.2 A change of preferences – boundary lovers become more attractive

People with immature limit-setting abilities usually find themselves involved with “boundary busters”. These may be family members, colleagues, friends, church members, and even spouses who regularly overstep their boundaries – because they let them do so. The boundary confusion seems normal to them, since they don't know better and are not really aware of the destruction it causes for them.

As you begin developing your own boundaries, however, you feel more attracted to people who can hear your no without giving you a hard time. They don't take it personal and are not hurt by your no. They do not try to make you feel guilty about it. They simply say: “OK, we'll miss you, but we see you next time”. Formerly, you didn't appreciate them, because that answer seemed so cold to you. But now you grow to like them, because you realize that they are so much easier to deal with – they care enough for you to accept your freedom and allow you to make your own choices without exercising pressure.

The reason for this shift is that we were created by God to be free. Free to love, free to be close to God and to others (**2. Corinthians 3:17, Galatians 5:1, Colossians 3:14**). And when we find relationships that allow us to be free to set our own limits, something wonderful happens. We find the freedom to say a wholehearted, unconflicted, gratitude-driven yes to others. They enable us to become honest, authentic, and loving individuals and that makes their companionship very refreshing.

Boundaries cannot develop in a vacuum. We need deep relationships with boundary lovers and to receive their support and understanding. Through them, God gives us the grace and power to begin the hard work of limit setting.

If you find honest people with clear boundaries somewhat harsh and cold and still feel drawn to people who enmesh you with their own feelings, if you still find these people more caring or interesting, think again. They may make you feel a part of the family, but they don't allow you to be who you really are. They make you say yes to things that you don't really want. You will find yourself constantly under pressure to please them and are always afraid to lose their love if you don't. In other words, they effectively prevent your personal and spiritual growth and you will lack the joy that the freedom in Christ brings.

Identify some honest, boundary loving people and try to get to know them better. You will see how refreshing it can be to be around them, because they make you experience a freedom that you never knew before.

12.3 Developing close connections to people with clear boundaries

The next step that usually follows our increasing preference for boundary lovers is that we begin developing close and meaningful relationships with them – either by setting clearer boundaries in our current relationships or by finding new attachments in which to invest.

This phase is crucial for our future growth, since boundaries – like any other spiritual discipline – cannot be developed in a vacuum. We need others who pursue the same values as we do to encourage us, practice with us, and hold us accountable.

... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (**John 1:17b**).

Jesus promised us that he would be right in our midst whenever we have fellowship with other Christians in His name (**Matthew 18:20**). The presence of His spirit together with the support of those who believe in us provides a spiritual and emotional home for us. No matter how severe the rejection of the person we're in conflict in, we are never alone and without love. And that makes all the difference in the world, when it comes to building and keeping firm boundaries.

We mentioned this over and over again: as long as you don't develop close friendships with boundary-loving people, you will have a hard time dealing with conflicts, particularly when the conflict is between you and your spouse. It is never too late to start such a friendship. You just have to allow other people to get to know you as you really are – step by step.

12.4 A change in our value system

After you have begun developing friendships with more clearly defined people, you will notice that your value system begins to change. You will realize that taking responsibility for yourself is healthy, while taking responsibility for other people's problems is destructive both for them and for you.

We learn what it means to love, because we are loved by God and other people (**1. John 4:19**). Grace coming from the outside makes us able to develop it inside as well, since our basic sense of ourselves – what we believe to be real and true – is influenced by our significant relationships. That is why so many people experienced no love in their childhood years seem not to be able to shake off a deep sense of being worthless and unloveable. But when Christians begin to value developing themselves into the image of God, a shift occurs. They realize that they are wonderfully made by God (**Psalms 139:14**) and that taking care of the talents God had given them is very important (**Matthew 25:14–30**). As a result, healing can take place.

This adjustment in your values is another crucial step on your way towards developing healthy boundaries. Some people become afraid when they notice the change that is going on. They fear becoming selfish and turn back, not realizing how important it is for them to learn self-protection and biblical boundaries.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is a wellspring of life (**Proverbs 4:23**).

Are you watching over your heart? Unless you value the treasures that God has given you – time, money, feelings, beliefs, etc. – and want to keep them protected, you can't guard your heart. How do you want others to treat these treasures? How do you want others not to treat them? Answer these questions truthfully in the light of Proverbs 4:23 and you will notice that a change is going on that will be beneficial for your spiritual and emotional growth.

12.5 Practicing boundaries in a safe environment

Once you are in the company of safe and boundary loving people and notice that you begin to value clearly defined responsibilities, it is time to practice setting limits where they are needed. This may not be easy for people who have never before dared to tell the truth and set limits to other people.

It is wise to start setting limits in a safe environment instead of beginning with the difficult people right away. After all, you have little experience in dealing with the negative reaction that the latter may give you and you have to overcome a lot of inner doubts and insecurities. You will notice that it is much easier to set limits with people who have expressed their unconditional love and acceptance to you and respond positively to your first attempts.

Even if you're tempted to do so, don't skip this important training step. Ask friends or a support group if you could work on boundaries with them. Learn to confront them about issues where you disagree or feel stepped upon. You may be surprised to see that they actually welcome what you do instead of resisting you, because they know that true intimacy is only built around the freedom to disagree.

He who conceals his hatred has lying lips (**Proverbs 10:18**)

12.6 Welcoming guilty feelings as sign of growth

As you begin becoming more truthful about what is and what is not your responsibility, you will experience a sense of self-condemnation. You feel guilty about what you have done, because you have transgressed some inner rules that were formerly very important to you.

Why is that?

So far you have seldomly based your decisions on your own values but on the desire to please the people around you. Even when you are surrounded by supportive boundary lovers, your conscience will not really allow you to set limits against other people. The reason for that your conscience, which is supposed to help you distinguishing right from wrong, has become an unbiblically harsh internal judge. Your weak conscience condemns you for imagined transgressions that biblically are no transgressions at all.

Welcome these guilty feelings, because activating the hostile conscience is a sign for spiritual growth. If you don't hear the inner protest, chances are that you are not doing anything different from before – that is that you're not moving ahead. Listen to these internal guilt messages but don't give in to them. Instead, compare them with the word of God. If they point to actual sin, you should repent and ask for forgiveness. But if your inner judge condemns you for breaking human traditions or self-imposed restraints, rejoice and go on, because you are on your way towards overcoming limitations that God never wanted you to have.

12.7 Practicing boundaries with “difficult” people

Now that you have done most of your homework it is time to go out and confront the real problems. Who is the person with whom it is most difficult for you to set limits? What relationships do you experience as complicated, conflict-laden, and sometimes even frightening. Straightening out these relationships is a major goal in becoming a truthful and mature person.

Make sure that you have practiced boundary setting before you attempt this step, because the ultimate target is not fixing your spouse or telling your parents no. The real goal of learning boundaries is maturity and becoming more Christ-like (**1. John 3:2**), able to give and receive love. The goal is to develop a character structure that can set limits on yourself and others at appropriate times. We can't love without boundaries and we can't work productively without boundaries, since without boundaries our love and our work will be driven by compliance or guilt.

As you develop an honest, goal-oriented character, you will become able of confronting those who really give you a hard time in a firm but loving way. Sometimes, your no will result in the other party being angry or hurt. Don't be afraid of that – what you see is a division in the relationship that has existed before but was never openly addressed. Boundaries simply bring these conflicts and disagreements to the surface and enable you to deal with them.

Prayerfully prepare these confrontations. Make a list of your significant relationships and of the specific treasures that are violated in them. Ask yourself what specific boundaries need to be set to protect these treasures. Think about appropriate forms of confrontation and talk with a friend about the steps you have to take. And then go these steps, knowing that God is with you.

12.8 Guilty feelings disappear

As you learn to establish appropriate boundaries within both safe and difficult relationships you will notice that the guilty feelings about setting limits begin to diminish. This is a good sign. Your conscience has adjusted spiritually and emotionally to God's truth. Instead of being influenced by human traditions, the desire to please others, and an overly critical internal judge, you now respond to biblical values: truth, love,

responsibility, and forgiveness. Your heart has found somewhere else to go for self-evaluation besides a critical conscience. You become able to keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience (**1. Timothy 3:9**).

If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ
(**Galatians 1:10b**).

Rejoice! Your practicing is beginning to pay off. You are now capable of being truthful to others without feeling bad about it – even if you have to express unpleasant truths. And the absence of guilty feelings will make you able to speak the truth in a kind and loving way.

12.9 Desiring others to have boundaries as well

All the stages so far had to do with growing in your own ability to *establish* boundaries. This, of course is only one half of what boundaries are about. Once you have learned to treasure freedom and responsibility, you will also learn to respect the boundaries that others have to set with you. There are several reasons why this is happening. You are now seeing the benefits of other people's boundaries for your own personal growth. They confront your own self-centeredness and help you become more God- and other-centered. Loving the boundaries of others helps you overcome a part of your fallen nature.

Loving other people's boundaries also increases your capacity to care about others. You already know how encouraging it was for you to be loved and accepted by others as you are. Now you become ready to do the same – to love not only the agreeable aspects of others but also their resistance, confrontation, and separateness. You now rejoice about the growth of others, even if that means that you will not get what *you* want. You are getting closer to loving your neighbor as yourself (**Galatians 5:14**). Parents may be able to understand this step more easily. You do not want your children to remain two-year olds, but you want them to grow. You want them to become mature personalities, capable of making their own choices wisely, so that they will be able to survive on their own when they finally leave you. You rejoice when you see them become independent – even if that involves becoming independent of you as well.

12.10 Free to say no instead of a half-hearted yes

There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said: "Son, go and work today in the vineyard". "I will not", he answered, but later changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, Sir", but did not go. Which of the two did what is father wanted?
(**Matthew 21:28–31**)

As you grow into a more responsible person, you will notice that you also grow in your ability to deal with situations where you are unsure how to respond.

People with undeveloped limit-setting abilities tend to say yes when they are being asked to do something, even if they are not sure whether they can actually live up to their promise. They do so out of a desire to please the other and to avoid conflict. Later, however, they regret their promise and either resentfully fulfill it or find excuses why they couldn't keep it. Either way, their premature yes has damaged their relationship with the people to whom they have made the promise.

Mature people consider the costs of their endeavors, before they commit to them (**Luke 14:28–30**). They are careful not to promise what they cannot deliver. If they are unsure, they say no instead of yes. They can still change their minds when they find the resources to do what they had been asked. As a consequence, they become free to keep the promises they make with a cheerful heart (**2. Corinthians 9:7**). They are driven by biblical values instead of outside pressure and over the time others will value them as reliable and responsible. The freedom to say no makes their yes more valuable.

If you still find yourself in the situations where you find it costly, painful, or inconvenient to keep a promise you made, don't resort to lame excuses why you "cannot" do what you promised.⁶ Instead, stop making promises you cannot keep. Calculate the costs and then let your yes be yes and your no be no (**Matthew 5:37**).

12.11 Value-driven goal setting

You have reached the final stage of your boundary development when you realize that you have a direction in your life. Values like love of God, love of your spouse, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, faithfulness, and holiness (Chapter 8) begin to be the driving force in your life. You plan ahead and steadily move towards your personal goals. And you help your spouse to do the same.

You are now reaping the fruit of years of work. Formerly you may have been controlling and impulsive, or compliant and nonconfrontative. Now you have developed a sense of responsibility and have become more honest. You spend time together with your spouse to review the last month or year and to plan for the next one. Like the apostle Paul, you can look back without regret

I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith
(**2. Timothy 4:7**)

But isn't that an illusion? Can we ever reach such a state? Doesn't life always bring trials, complications, and people who try to force me onto their track instead of God's?

⁶Unfortunately, it has become a tradition to make promises like "I'll call you", "I'll pray for you", "Stop by when you're in the area", "We should get together some day", etc. that we do not really take serious. We just say it – we may even mean it at the time. But later we often don't live up to that promise or even forget that we have made it at all.

Of course it will. Having mature boundaries doesn't mean that your life will be without difficulties and people resisting your boundaries and goals. But mature people make room for that. They don't assume that everything always goes smoothly. They make realistic plans instead of setting overly optimistic goals. They are prepared to deal with people who resist them in a loving but firm way. And most of all, they let the Holy Spirit guide them in all their plans and actions.

So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. . . . the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their sinful nature with its passion and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (**Galatians 5:16, 22–25**)