

“That’s Out of Bounds”

Ephesians 5:8-20

Series: Mend Week 5. Boundary Conflicts

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In high school my friends and I loved to play ultimate Frisbee. So you can see why I am so excited to find two guys playing Frisbee in the park next to the church. They even dress the way we did in the 70s. Trouble is they are very slow. So I tried to disrupt the game, steal the Frisbee, make spectacular diving catches and even pick their pockets. Despite all my out bounds behavior, they stayed cool.

In Ultimate Frisbee we frequently argued if a player was out of bounds. You and I have moments in our relationships which are out of bounds. Sometimes you may even wish a referee would throw a penalty flag or review the instant replay. So what do you do when a relationship is out of bounds?

Last week in our Mend series we learned a boundary is the invisible property line which shows where I end and you begin, what is my responsibility and what is not. The most common barrier to drawing a line and creating boundaries is fear. We fear others will hurt us. Perhaps they think we are trying to hurt them when we are really trying to stop enabling or controlling them.

So how do we resolve a boundary conflict? In your bulletin you will find a seven step process. I encourage you to take out that sheet, select a conflict you have with someone. It could be your spouse, children, family member, coworker, church member, neighbor, even yourself or God. Don’t write the person’s name on the page. Just picture the situation and jot down some answers as we go through these questions.

1. Identify the Symptoms In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes,

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. Ephesians 5:8-11

Many of us live in the darkness of denial. Maybe we live with family secrets. We cover over or hide serious issues. We minimize or rationalize our behavior or the actions of others. We stuff feelings down deep and tell everyone we are fine. Yet the feelings don’t stay buried. They bubble up to the surface. Sometimes they even explode over a situation which is completely unrelated to the real problem. Ask yourself this about your relationship: Do you feel anxiety, anger, resentment, stress, worry or fear? Do you feel you can’t forgive? Do you find you can’t stop thinking about the situation? Do you find yourself arguing with the person in your head? Those feelings are often the symptoms of a boundary conflict. Write down the symptoms you feel. Paul says a healthy relationship is lived in the Light of the Lord. A healthy relationship will be characterized by

goodness, righteousness and truth. If you feel the other emotions, writing them down and talking them out will expose them and bring them into the Light.

2. Identify the Root Causes of the Symptoms. Jesus said “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.” (Matthew 12:33) If the relationship is yielding bad fruit there’s something wrong. It is the source of the symptoms you feel. Here are some roots that cause a relationship to yield bad fruit. These may be true of you, the other person, or both.

- a. Never learned how to set limits
- b. Always protected from facing consequences
- c. Out of control behavior was rewarded
- d. Fear of letting anyone get too close
- e. A hunger for love that was not given
- f. Rebellion against a strict upbringing
- g. Buried hurt from neglect or abuse
- h. Emotional hurt as an adult

There are many root causes to our pain. As in a garden, roots are often hard to reach. It may take counseling to uncover these roots. If you can, write them on your paper. Jesus wants us to “make a tree good.” He wants us to be free from these.

3. Identify the Boundary Conflict. Paul continues in Ephesians 5:

But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:13,15-16

What is the specific out of bounds behavior that needs to be brought to the Light? Paul warns us to stop fooling ourselves and seize the opportunity to begin working on the boundary conflicts in our relationships. Here are some boundary conflicts which may be true of you, the other person, or both of you:

- a. Eating – using food for comfort or control
- b. Money – overspending, impulse spending, chronically in debt
- c. Time Management – missing deadlines, always last-minute and stressed
- d. Task Completion - promising but not completing tasks, resolutions, plans
- e. Words – gossip, sarcasm, anger, swearing, threats, lies, seduction
- f. Sexuality – caught up in out of bounds or out of control behavior
- g. Alcohol or Substances – is this negatively impacting family and career

If you see any of these boundary conflicts operating in one of your relationships, Paul says don't fool yourself. Be honest about it. Write it on your paper. Call it what it is.

4. Identify Who Needs to Take Responsibility As followers of Jesus, we must live God's way. This includes taking responsibility for our part in an unhealthy relationship. Paul writes,

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:3-4

I cannot control someone else's behavior. But I can recognize what is under my control and work to keep my side of the street clean. Paul tells us to begin with getting rid of sexual immorality, impurity and greed. These are summed up in a four letter word: lust.

How is lust different than love? The simple answer is lust takes, but love gives. Case in point: The *New England Journal of Medicine* reported a strange discovery made by French doctors. A 62-year-old man entered the hospital suffering from stomach pain. When doctors operated, they removed 12 pounds of coins as well as necklaces and needles. Despite his family's attempts to keep money and jewelry away from him, the man swallowed 350 coins over the course of a decade. The condition is known as "pica," a compulsion to swallow inedible items. The patient's stomach was badly damaged. Twelve days after doctors removed \$650 from his belly, he died.¹

Lust is an unnatural hunger for something normal. Money, food, medicine, alcohol and sex are normal. Lust creates an unnatural hunger for them. We crave more and more. We force something normal to fill an emptiness only God can satisfy. The result is often destructive and disastrous. Lust takes. Lust is never satisfied. Lust destroys. Love gives. Love brings life. Live a life of love, not lust. Whether you lust for food, money, sex, alcohol, control, possessions or power, you can build healthy boundaries by receiving the love of Jesus who "loved us and gave himself up for us." You can also build boundaries by not enabling, supporting or encouraging the lust of the other person. Let them take responsibility for their part. On your paper, write down what you need to do for yourself and what you need to stop doing for the other person.

5. Identify What You Need to Proceed To build healthy boundaries we need the help of a few trusted confidential Christian friends. Paul writes,

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Ephesians 4:15-16

¹ *Chicago Sun-Times* (2-19-04).

To change a destructive pattern, to break through denial, we need someone from the outside to tell us the truth. We need a friend, a pastor, a loved one to hold up a mirror and help us see what we don't want to see, to see what is really going on, to see the toll it is taking. Yet we need someone who will speak this truth with love. Some of our friends are so loving they never tell us the truth while others are not very loving when they clobber us with the truth. We need truth and love because, as Paul says, that's the way we grow up. On your paper, write down the name of one or two you trust who love you and will tell you the truth you need to hear.

6. How Do You Begin? What is the first step you must take to lay the foundation for a better boundary? You have already begun by identifying and writing down the conflict on your paper. Yet exercises like these only go so far. Vows to stop acting out or enabling others are usually useless. Promises to change are often not worth a handful of change. The place to begin is with the Lord. Paul says,

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Ephesians 5:17-18

To lay the foundation for a solid boundary we need to begin with the will of the Lord in God's Word and the power of the Spirit. Why? You and I are an empty cup. We go through life seeking people or things to fill our cup. This is the ultimate reason we find it hard to say "No." We want to be liked and loved and we feel if we say "Yes" they will fill our cup with love. If we do what they want, they will fill our cup with love. If we enable their behavior, they will fill our cup with love. The same is true when we lust for money, sex, power, possessions or alcohol. We want to fill our cup. The trouble is, they never satisfy, they never fulfill us. Why? They weren't designed or intended to.

Only the presence and power of God is able to fill us up. We need to be filled by the Spirit. The verb tense in this verse is a continuous one – continually be filled by the Spirit. This is not a one-time topping off of your life. You wouldn't eat once for the rest of your life. You don't fill the tank once for the life of your car. You keep being filled. This is why prayer and God's Word are so essential.

Next Sunday we kick off a five week message series called "Enter the Center" We'll discover the purpose, the power, and the practice of prayer. We begin the study with Prayer Anywhere starting Saturday, August 5 at 6 AM to Sunday, August 6 at 6 AM. Sign up for an hour of prayer – morning, noon, evening, night. You do not have to come here. Pray anywhere – at home, work, in a park with the Frisbee players. We'll give you prayer suggestions. We want to cover all 24 time slots with prayer.

Then, invite a friend or family member to join you for the message series. Begin to build healthy, godly boundaries by letting the love of God fill you and overflow to others. If God's overflowing love fills me, I can give it to you freely. I don't need to squeeze love out of you to fill my cup.

7. What Accountability and Consequences Do You Need to Keep Going?

When someone comes out of a 30, 60 or 90 day rehab program, they must continue in a support group such as AA or NA or they will be right back where they were before entering the clinic. Paul tells us we all need accountability: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). Submission is equal and it is humble. I give you permission to hold me accountable and you do the same. I ask you to speak the truth with love to me and you allow me to do the same. I ask you to let me deal with the consequences of my actions and I don’t save you from facing the consequences of your actions. I practice saying “no” to you, you tell me “no” and we still respect each other. Together we do all this out of our love and devotion for Jesus Christ.

Cloud and Townsend tell the story of Jean who learned the difference boundaries can make. One morning her eight-year-old son Bryan tried his usual shenanigans. At the breakfast table he sulked, pouted and said, “I’m not going to school – and no one’s going to make me!” Normally Jean tried to talk her son into going to school or blew up in frustration. This morning was different. “You’re right, Honey. No one can make you go to school. That has to be something you choose to do. However, if you don’t choose to go to school, you *are* choosing to stay in your room all day with no TV or devices. But that’s something you’ll have to decide for yourself, like you did last week.” Bryan remembered and finally said, “Well, I’ll go-but I don’t have to like it!” “Absolutely,” Jean agreed. “You don’t have to like a lot of things. But I’m sure you made the right choice.”

After Bryan went off to school, Jean received a call from her husband, Jerry, who was driving to work. “Honey,” he said. “I just found out I have a meeting after work. The last time I showed up late for dinner, there wasn’t any. Think you could save some this time?” Jean laughed. “Last time, you never called me to let me know. I really appreciate your telling me in advance. I’ll feed the kids, and you and I will eat together later.”

“My son makes it to school, even with a cranky attitude. My husband calls me to inform me about schedule changes. Lord, I must be dreaming.”²

Boundaries work, if you work them.

² Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No to Take Control of Your Life* (1992) p. 269-270.