

# **PROTECT YOURSELF WITH BHB\*\***

## **\*\*BUILDING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES**



**Discover the sources of your emotional  
boundaries**

**Learn how to revise your unhealthy boundaries**

**Learn how to strengthen healthy boundaries**

INTRODUCTION TO  
PROTECT YOURSELF WITH BHB\*\*  
(\*\*BUILDING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES)

Thanks for your interest. I pray these teaching materials will lead you into a deeper understanding of yourself and of God.

The teaching portion is divided into sections short enough to read during any brief time period. They are designed to provoke thought and introspection and to direct you to more study as needed.

You will find a study guide at the back of the piece. It is also divided into sections that correlate with the teaching portions. The study questions can be used on your own or with a group for discussion. Like the teaching, they are meant to stimulate soul-searching, as well as God-seeking.

Each teaching and study guide section may be removed and perused separately. Reorganize them as you wish!

The materials are taken from my own experiences, study, and understanding. They are not intended to take the place of teaching or counseling, but to supplement them. If you are seeing a counselor, you may consider them as an addition to your healing journey.

Blessings—

CF Sherrow

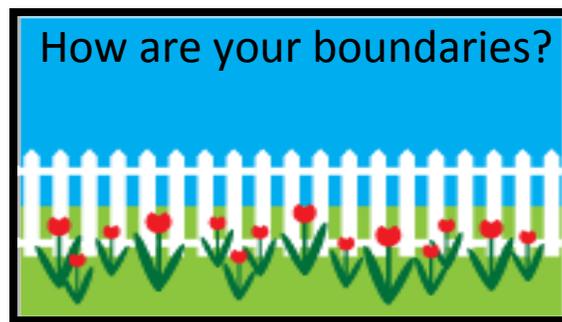
Cords of Grace Ministries

## Part 1

# Building Healthy Boundaries

Consider this proverb: “Good fences make good neighbors.”

I have no idea of the origin of this old phrase, but it still rings true physically as well as emotionally. Good emotional boundaries keep us safe and they are part of establishing good, healthy relationships. Good emotional neighbors, if you will.



Bad boundaries are pretty worthless. This is true whether they are too weak or too strong.

**If your boundaries are too weak**, they are like a broken-down fence made of tiny sticks and wispy strings. Any gates that exist are crooked, hanging on rusty hinges. Anyone can get in, good or bad.

When the bad folks invade, they bring in a world of hurt. You are left with no defense.

**If your boundaries are too strong**, no one can get in. Occasionally, someone will be persistent and loving enough to make it through, but it's rare. You find yourself isolated inside a defending boundary made of steel and bricks, and it's thick and tall.

Can't see through it, can't get around or over it, can't tunnel under.



How did those unfortunate excuses for boundaries ever get built?

I don't think any of us intends to have bad boundaries. They are built from fear and ignorance, from pain and shame. **They are often built by default:** we had no template, no example that taught us how to build healthy boundaries, so we constructed bad ones.

**Once again we find that our responses to childhood experiences dictate our actions:**

- *If you were abused or bullied, you may have reacted with submission and shame. You may have subconsciously believed you had no right to have appropriate boundaries— that you deserved to be hurt.*

**You felt worthless and you built boundaries that also ended up being worthless.**

- *The same kinds of experiences may have led you to respond with anger and defiance. You determined that no one would ever hurt you again.*

**You built boundaries that were too strong out of self-defense.**

- *Perhaps you were pretty much left to fend for yourself. No one taught you about boundaries or showed you how to build proper ones, either by instruction or by example. I think that's more common than we realize. People tend to avoid the issue or they are so busy making life happen that instruction gets lost in the shuffle. Lots of parents defer the responsibility of this type of training to the schools and/or churches. I can understand that attitude if they are struggling with their own boundaries. How can we teach what we don't understand?*

There is no doubt that we build unhealthy boundaries out of ignorance.

So most of us just live with unhealthy boundaries. Our personalities and reactions to earlier experiences determine whether those boundaries are too strong or too weak.

*There is good news—it isn't too late to fix your fences!*

## Part 2

# Why Did I Draw These Borders Here?



Every one of us is like her own little country. And every country has boundaries or borders. Some are more lax than others. Some have checkpoints and soldiers stationed there.

**Have you discovered what type of boundaries you have?** Are they good or bad? How can you find out? How can they be repaired or rebuilt?

**First, go back to the beginning.**

- *Think about when you were growing up. Were you abused, bullied, teased? Were you ignored and your emotional needs unmet? How did you respond? Did it make you furious or did you pretend it didn't matter? Were you afraid of rocking the boat?*

**In an ideal situation, your parents would have acknowledged your feelings and guided you in appropriate choices. Their training would have strengthened you.**

- *What about now? How do you respond to unfair treatment? Do you stand up for what's right or do you hide? Do you overreact by either raging or isolating yourself? Can you see where your earlier experiences molded your current behavior?*

**If you are having trouble deciding what type of boundaries you have, look around.** Find someone who seems to act appropriately to challenges (not perfectly but consistently). This person will be calm, assured, and honest. They will confront a wrongdoer but not attack. They will compromise without degrading themselves.

They have appropriate boundaries, owning their emotions and responses, making healthy choices. Their boundaries are flexible, adjusting according to

circumstances. Compare your responses with theirs to help you discover if your boundaries are too strong or too weak. If you know the person well enough, ask her how she developed those boundaries.

**That person may have been taught by her family of origin, but don't be surprised if she struggled to form them as an adult.** Just like you and me.

The next stop in preparation for fixing your fences is to realize, to be absolutely convinced, that you are worthy of having good boundaries. You do not deserve to be run over by someone who shouldn't have been let in at all. You also do not deserve to be a prisoner in a dungeon of your own making.



Be honest with yourself.

God says great things about you. (I'll bet your friends do, too). Ask God to reveal the truth about how He sees you. Listen for the answer without fear. He never condemns His children. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus . . ." (Romans 8:1, NKJV). This is only one reference to His love for us. If you haven't already done it, look up and memorize others so they are handy when you need them.

You may need to talk to a counselor, pastor, or wise friend about this. If you continue to believe lies about yourself that make it hard to accept your own worth, it will be that much harder to repair or replace the unhealthy boundaries.

You may have some unhealthy soul ties. Check out ***Blessed be the (Soul) Ties That Bind . . . or Not. (PDF)***

You might have some forgiving to do. Read ***Release Rage and Promote Peace Through Forgiveness. (PDF)***

(These are both available from my website)

Ask God to reveal these issues and then follow through on His leading.

One more thing: don't get discouraged. Fixing unhealthy boundaries isn't a one-time thing. It will take lots of time and practice to get it right.

**The important thing is to get started.**

## Part 3

### Weak and Wobbly Walls

I love old houses and historic buildings, but it can make me nervous when the floors creak and the walls whistle with the blowing wind. Is the building going to hold or collapse? Will it protect or will it injure?

**If your personal walls are weak and wobbly, watch out!**

It's time to fix that poor construction.



When dealing with those who manipulate you, be aware of this: Those who are used to you giving in to them will probably be angry when you don't cave in to their demands. They may reject you, try to isolate you, or blame you.

**These reactions are to be expected.**

These people have known you as you have been for many years and have gotten used to it. They probably like your unhealthy boundaries because it lets them be in control, whether through anger or whining. When you make the attempt to change, it will throw them off-kilter. Let them own their feelings and reactions. You can only change yourself.

**Don't give up. Don't give in.**

**All right, it's time to get started.** You have discovered your unhealthy boundaries so you'll need to make the decision to change. Stick with it!

After your decision is made, it's best to **make a plan**. Make things easier by strategizing about specific people and situations that continually challenge you.

- *If you always submit to someone demanding or even "guilting" you into sacrificing your family or personal time so you can pamper them, determine to offer an alternative. You could say, "I understand you want to spend time with me, but I have to help my child with a school project right now. I'll give you a call tomorrow morning around ten." And then follow through as promised.*

**Unless there is an emergency, your commitment to yourself, your spouse, and your children must come first after your commitment to God.** You are an adult. Remember, I Corinthians 13 says that *when I was a child I spoke (and reacted) as a child . . . now that I am an adult, I have put away childish things.*

A healthy adult acts or responds rather than reacting.



**Don't let another person's whining or complaining derail your good and healthy plan.** You will probably feel guilty, but own your feelings by acknowledging them and reminding yourself that your response was healthy. Ask God for comfort and for wisdom (James 1:5). Ask Him to show you how He sees them.

- *If you tend to submit to others who rage, argue, or insult you, step back and say something like, "I get very uncomfortable when you say things like that. I am going into the other room now. I'll come back when you are calmer." You are sending the message that you are no longer accepting their manipulation.*

They will likely stomp and bluster for a while, but when they realize that you are refusing to play the game they should start trying to communicate more calmly. Remember, it will demand strength and persistence on your part.

**If you are in a truly abusive relationship, it will be best to actually leave and communicate from a distance, possibly through a third party. *Your safety is paramount.***

Again, if your attempts to correct your responses are unsuccessful, don't give up. Shake off the disappointment and try again next time. No one succeeds right away; you are breaking lifelong patterns of behavior and learning new ones.

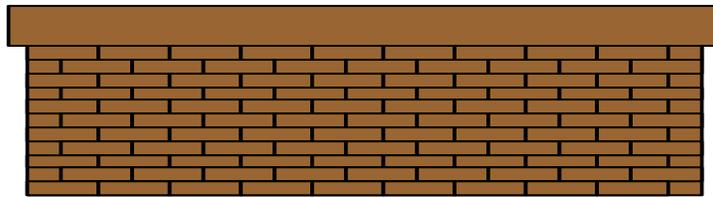
And that can be a lot of work!

## Part 4

### A Fortress is a Lonely Home

**Have your boundaries become the fortress that keeps bad folks out, but also the good?** I can relate. I never quite understood why I had so few friends compared to others, or why no one seemed to understand me. It's very lonely inside the fortress.

Are you one who reacted with anger and rejection to protect yourself from ill treatment?



**Some of us decided at a young age that we only had ourselves to lean on.** If we were to be safe, it was up to us. The emotional boundaries we erected were strong. Too strong.

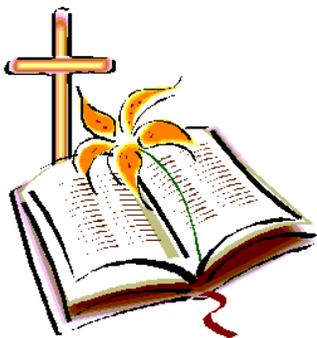
Is that you?

**I have some good news for you.** It's no harder (and may be a bit easier) to take down the fortress than to build from scratch like those with flimsy boundaries have to do.

Again, **get a strategy established.** Decide what you can do differently when someone approaches. *Don't make yourself into a door mat—please don't think I am saying you need to do that!*

No, what you need to do is to start taking out a few bricks from your walls. Believe that you are worthy of having healthy boundaries. Realize there are people you can trust, just waiting for you to give them a chance. Ask God for wisdom in that area.

- Start with someone you think is trustworthy. This will be someone who clearly cares about others. If they ask you to join them for coffee, agree. Choose neutral ground and transport yourself there. It will be safe. The idea is to stop saying “no” automatically to every invitation. And when a friendship starts blooming, perhaps you could be the one to suggest getting together.
- Join a Bible study. It’s all right to just sit and listen for a time or two, but when you get a bit accustomed to the routine, join in the discussion. You don’t have to be brilliant, just let someone know your thoughts and feelings on a certain subject. Can you feel a brick loosening?



- If someone invites you for a party or a potluck, accept. You could always tell them you can’t stay too long. This will give you a comfortable “out” if you get stressed.
- Okay, now we’re starting to stretch more. Ask someone to pray for you. Maybe for something generic, like wisdom to make a good decision at work. It’s pretty hard to find someone who will turn you down. And you are letting them see beyond the defense you’ve built. Safely.

Getting the idea? Just like the other boundary-setting exercises, this is step by step. A slow process.

You will have times when you just want to chuck it all in the nearest dumpster. That’s all right. You’ve had super-strong boundaries for most of your life. You’re used to acting a certain way to defend yourself.

**But you don't need to be that tough anymore.** God is now your defender.

Ask Him for help. Then let Him do it.

He's waiting.

## Part 5

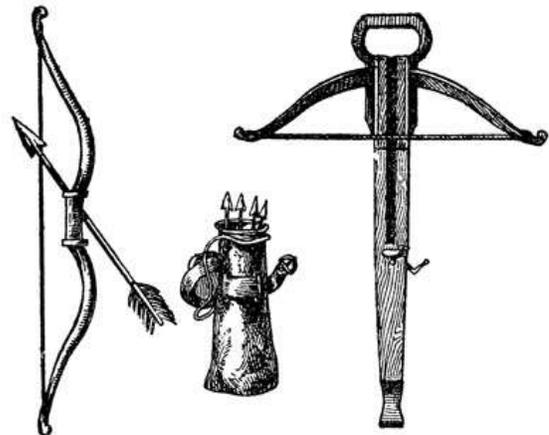
### Drop Your Weapons!

The raging bull never cares about running over people. Stomping, goring, and snorting to achieve his ends is a way of life to him. His weapons are part of him. He can't put them down.

How about you? **Have you made the decision to establish healthy boundaries, even though it might make you seem weak in your own eyes?**

Ready to drop the weapons you use to stay in control of relationships?

Good for you!



Be aware that someone who is used to you raging and/or taking control away from them will be confused and respond from that confusion. She may pull away. She may look like she's waiting for "the other shoe to drop." She could even be relieved for a little while, but when she realizes this isn't a one-time thing the confusion and wariness could very well resume, at least for a while.

If she is also trying to establish healthy emotional boundaries, please support and help her. **You will be far out of your comfort zone for a while.** The best response will be for you to accept her attempts to change, observe for positive changes, and acknowledge them. This will not be easy. You are beginning to change long-term habits, just as she is. Be patient—with both of you!

Please understand that your poor boundaries and reactions have been hurting her badly. **You must regain her trust.** That will only be accomplished through persistence, patience, and consistency. You can do this!

Once again, make a plan ahead of time. Strategize about what you will do when the circumstances occur that trigger your manipulative and/or angry responses. The first thing you should decide to do is to start with calm communication. When you feel yourself wanting to take over, to insult, even to bully, stop and take a deep breath. Step away. Count to ten if it helps. **Do whatever you need to do to stop the cycle.**

Then ask the other person, “What are you trying to tell me? I don’t think I understand.” Or, “What do you need?” If you are unable to put yourself in her place and empathize, ask whatever questions that will help you clarify the situation.



She may be stumped if you ask about her current needs. Most people who have weak emotional boundaries are not used to realizing their own needs, much less verbalizing them. She may try to skirt the issue. Here’s where the technique of “active listening” can come in handy. Respond in this manner to help her clarify her thoughts: “I think I hear you saying (this). Is that right?” Essentially, **ask her if what you are hearing is actually what she means to say.**

I know this can be very frustrating, especially if you are used to being the controlling person in almost every situation. I can promise you this: a healthy relationship with healthy emotional boundaries on both sides will improve your lives significantly. You’ll have more peace, more confidence, more true communication, and more genuine love.

How long will it take to change unhealthy boundaries to healthy ones? I can’t tell you. Every person is different. God will help. Continually check in with Him. Ask for wisdom, strength, and courage.

As you both change, you will begin to notice more evidence of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

And that's a wonderful way to live!



\*\* Some of this material was gleaned from the book, "Boundaries", by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend. It is an in-depth guide to setting emotional as well as physical boundaries, and a classic in the field. I highly recommend it. A companion book, "Beyond Boundaries" by the same authors is also quite beneficial.

## PROTECT YOURSELF WITH BHB\*\*

### STUDY GUIDE

The term *boundary* has been in use since about 1620 and was taken from the term *bond*. The original meaning was related to territory in reference to the limits of land or possessions.

A *bondservant* had more stringent limitations than did an employee. If one is arrested and posts *bond money*, certain limits on movement are imposed.

More recently, *emotional boundaries* have been defined in much the same way—the limits of personal space as delineated by each individual.

The Dictionary.com definition:

Boundary: noun. Plural: boundaries.

1. Something that indicates bounds or limits; a limiting or bounding line.

The Wikipedia definition:

*Personal boundaries* are guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify for themselves what are reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave towards him or her and how they will respond when someone steps past those limits. They are built out of a mix of conclusions, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, past experiences and social learning.

## **PART 1 BUILDING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES**

1. Can you see your own emotional boundaries? Do you think they are too weak, too strong, or about right?
2. Why do you think you might have developed this type of boundaries?
3. Have you ever tried to repair or rebuild your emotional boundaries? What was the result?
4. Are you ready to try (or to try again)? If not, what can you do to prepare for change?

## **PART 2 WHY DID I DRAW THESE BORDERS HERE?**

1. Did your parents or family help you establish healthy boundaries? If so, please describe how they did this important teaching. If not, have you forgiven them for letting you down?
2. Do you know anyone who seems to have appropriate, healthy emotional boundaries? Do you feel comfortable asking them how they developed these boundaries? What questions would you ask?
3. Do you believe, deep down, that God loves you unconditionally? Why or why not?
4. Have you discovered a need to forgive someone? Do you have unholy soul ties that have resulted in unhealthy boundaries? Are you willing to follow through in taking care of these issues? What might be a first step?

### **PART 3 WEAK AND WOBBLY WALLS**

1. Do you think your emotional boundaries might be too weak? What is your evidence?
2. If you have too-weak boundaries, why do you think you developed them?
3. Are you ready to begin work on revising your too-weak boundaries? Why or why not?
4. What three things might you do to start rebuilding your weak boundaries into appropriate ones?
5. What kinds of responses from others do you anticipate as you work on your boundaries?

## **PART 4 A FORTRESS IS A LONELY HOME**

1. Do you believe your emotional boundaries may be too strong?  
What is your evidence?
2. What circumstances might have led you to develop boundaries that are too strong?
3. Are you ready to work on revising your boundaries? Why or why not?
4. List three things you might be able to do to start the process.
5. What kinds of responses might you expect from those around you?

## **PART 5 DROP YOUR WEAPONS!**

1. Do you believe you might have become an aggressive person in your relationships? What evidence do you see to prove or disprove this belief?
  
2. Think about a person in your life who you tend to “bowl over”. Give three examples of active listening that you can use to improve your communication with that person.
  
3. Do you know someone who should be (or is) trying to improve her emotional boundaries? What type of boundaries do they have? List three ways you might be able to help and support them in the effort to change.
  
4. How might you practice empathy with someone who has lost the ability to voice their own desires and needs?