

Better Parents – Better People: Know Your Boundaries

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Galatians 6:1-5/Proverbs 14:10

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. Galatians 6:1-5 (NRSV)

The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy. Proverbs 14:10 (NRSV)

Join with me in prayer. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear, and our hearts, God, open up our hearts that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I am the parent of five adult children. It's sort of an oxymoron if you think of it – adult children. But they're grownups; they're really not children anymore. But they're still *my* children and that's where the challenge comes. It's because there are things that are just none of my business anymore. Like how they spend their money is not my business anymore. That's their business. How they treat their husbands is not my business. How they raise their children is not my business anymore. Oh, they may invite input, but I don't think I should offer it without invitation.

Now I may see things that concern me. I may wonder about things; I have questions that spin around in my head. But the truth is it's not my business.

This is an issue of boundaries, of how we negotiate these places where we decide whether it's appropriate to offer our thoughts. I find it so interesting because this Scripture comes from where Paul has been doing this wonderful theology about grace

and how important it is that we focus on grace and not on law. Then he moves to these sort of nitty-gritty issues of how we live together. And it's really important when you think about it because in the Christian faith it's probably more important for us than anyone. Because the Christian faith is about a relationship with Jesus. It is a relational faith, not about certain religious or spiritual practices. It's not primarily about following certain rules or believing certain things. It's about having a living, powerful relationship with Jesus. So knowing how to do relationship well is essential for the Christian faith. When you read this Scripture, I find it really funny because this somehow really tickles me. He says in verse 2: "Bear one another's burdens for in this way you fulfill the law of Christ." Then in verse 5 he says, "For all must carry their own loads."

Now which is it, Paul? I'm really confused and when you read this what you discover is that he has this same struggle that we do about how to know where to go. So even the just beginning of it he says, "My friends, if anyone has detected a transgression you who have received the spirit should restore such a one with a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. That you don't find yourself judgmental. That you don't find yourself self-righteous."

Have you ever wondered why sometimes when we hear the evangelist preach on the street corner it makes us shudder? You know, there's a difference between witnessing and preaching in such a way that violates boundaries. That says, "This is how you should live your life." As opposed to a witness that says, "Let my light shine. This is who I am."

I'm not very good at this boundary stuff I must confess. There's a book by a Christian psychologist named Dr. Henry Cloud and it's called *Boundaries*. It's sold seven million copies now, it's a New York Times bestseller, and it's built on Scriptural principles with the Bible all through it. I recommend it highly. I think it's especially important for us as Christians to sort of wrestle with this. And here's why. As Christians we have a really strong sense of what's right and wrong. In other words the moral compass inside us is tuned and we are looking to identify the difference between right and wrong in the world around us. And second, we're also tied together in a community, so we have all these interlocking relationships and we care about one another. We see one another as family. And third, we're just built to try and help other people. So what

happens is that as Christians we find ourselves deciding that our job is to be fixers, “Let me fix you. I have the answers – if you would just listen to me.”

It’s a problem with boundaries. So here’s what I want to do is to share with you three of the major concepts that I have learned from this study. There’s way more than this and I want to encourage you to dig a little deeper.

Here’s the first basic concept. It’s the most basic and it’s the law of responsibility. Here it goes; “A boundary is like a property line and it says, ‘This belongs to me and I’m responsible for it. That belongs to you and you’re responsible for it. You take responsibility for yours, for your life, I’ll take responsibility for my life. I am not responsible for your life and by the way you’re not responsible for mine.”

That’s the essence of boundaries, that we take responsibility for our own lives. Look, God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and said, “Here’s the boundary. Don’t eat of that tree!” Then God said, “You take responsibility –I give you free will. I’m not building a fence or a wall around the tree to keep you from getting in there; you have responsibility for your life.” God could have said, “I’m going to make you my puppets. I’m not going to let you – I’m going to take responsibility for your lives.” But God didn’t do that but gave us free will and in fact said, “You have dominion, you have responsibility. You are a steward. So take responsibility.”

That’s why the Scripture here says, “Each must carry their own loads.”

I kind of liked the image of a football team. This is for all you football fans in the group. On a football team everybody has their own responsibility. What does the coach say? “Stay in your own lane!” It’s true in soccer, too. “Stay in your own lane! Don’t take somebody else’s lane. Don’t think, ‘Because the ball’s over there, I have to be over there.’” Because the ball may end up over here pretty quick. “You do your job; you be responsible for your job and let that person be responsible for their job.”

And the truth is that if I go do their job not only have I left my job undone, but they’re not going to learn to do their job either. So for it to work everyone takes responsibility for their own lives.

If this is about parents, then as parents the scope of responsibly for a child grows over time. An infant is born and has no responsibility for his or her own life at all. The parent is completely responsible. But as time goes on their responsibility grows and we

teach them to take that responsibility. We don't say to a two-year-old toddler who runs out into the street, "Well, you're responsible for your own life. Get hit by a car and you won't do it again." No, of course not. Because we still have responsibility for a huge scope of their lives. And as they grow, they take more and more responsibility and we teach them not to be responsible for the life of somebody else.

It's like when my two oldest daughters Katie and Coatney are in the back seat of the car and Katie says, "Coatney's eating candy back here!" And what do parents say? They might say, "Katie, you worry about you and Coatney worries about her." Then we say, "Coatney quit eating candy!" But it is the truth. We say, "Don't worry about your sister and worry about yourself. You take care of your own life and you let your sister take care of her life."

So we want to teach them to have that sense of responsibility for their own lives.

Now let me just ask a question that's meddling a little bit. How many of us did your children's science fair projects? I remember staying up doing a social studies project into the middle of the night and the whole time I'm resentful about it. But I'm doing it and I'm asking, "Why am I doing this project?"

I was a Cub Scout and I show up at the Pinewood Derby with my personally third grade-made Pinewood Derby race car. Chunky, you know. There are other cars there that were clearly in a wind tunnel being tested by an engineer with a number of grams of weight put in the right spot. You think, "This isn't right. That third grader did not do that!"

The idea is how do we teach children to grow and claim their responsibility. Now, friends, this doesn't just have to do with parenting. This has to do with life. This has to do with how we do relationships. To say, "I'm going to be responsible for my life and I'm not responsible for yours." But the issue of boundaries recognizes that it doesn't have to do with their behavior, it has to do with our behavior. What I choose to do, that I'm responsible for my life and I'll make my decisions about my behavior.

For those of you who may have been in a Recovery Community there's something called An Addict's Triangle. It's been very helpful for me to understand it, just how I deal with things in general. Imagine an inverted triangle so the points at the bottom and on top two corners are the words *persecutor* and *rescuer*. And at the bottom is the word

victim. And if you are in a family that has someone dealing with addiction, you might find yourself moving back and forth between rescuer and persecutor and rescuer and persecutor, “I’m going to help you, I’m going to save you, I’m going to do this with you. I’m going to throw all the bottles of alcohol. I’m going to make sure you’re in rehab. I’m going to do all those things and then when it doesn’t work then you are such a jerk! Don’t you realize what you’re doing to our family?” And then you move back and forth and the whole time this person is completely unempowered and falls into the place of victim. Until we begin to realize that it’s not about what they’re doing. Sure, what they’re doing is creating terrible problems. But you can’t control what they’re doing. All you can do is control what you’re doing. So you can say, “You can drink, but I’m going to leave if you drink. This is what I’m doing.” Let me make it less terrible or as such a challenge. You can say, “You can lie on the couch all evening and do nothing, but I’m going to quit cooking dinner. It’s not that I’m telling you what you have to do; it’s that I’m going to decide my own behavior. What I’m going to do.”

This is what Jesus teaches. Jesus says, “If someone hits you on one cheek, turn the other one to them as well.” We think to ourselves, “He’s just challenging us to be a doormat.” No, he’s not. What he’s saying is “I will not let you determine my behavior. You can be hitting all you want to, but I’m not hitting back. I’m not doing that. Because I follow a law of love and I’m not going to do it. I’ll take responsibility for my life; you take responsibility for yours.”

So that’s the first basic concept. The second is what we see in the passage just before that. This is the law of consequences. Robert Fulghum wrote a book called *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down on it*. I love that title. The book is a series of stories and that’s from one of the stories. It’s about how a guy who was rescued from a burning bed and the fireman asked him, “How did it catch on fire?” And the guy said, “I don’t know. It was on fire when I lay down on it.” How often are we like that?

He tells the story of going to see a Zen master and after a while he’s leaving, he asked the Zen master to summarize his teaching, and give him something he could remember. The master went and got a scroll off the wall and when he came back this was what was on the scroll that he read to Fulghum. It read, “There is really nothing you must be, there is really nothing you must do, and there is really nothing you must have, and

there is really nothing you must know, and there is really nothing you must become. However, it helps to understand that fire burns and when it rains the earth gets wet. Whatever - there are consequences. Nobody is exempt.”

You can do whatever you’re going to do. I’m not in charge of your life. But just know that there will be consequences that will lead to something, that will make a difference. Whatever you do will make a difference. In some way.

Listen to the Scripture we’ve been reading today. I had to really wrestle with this a while to understand it and then I got the idea. “For if those who are nothing think they are something then they deceive themselves. All must test their own work and then that work rather than their neighbor’s work will become a cause for pride.”

In other words, don’t fool yourself. Don’t pretend you’re doing something when you’re not. Because ultimately, you’ll pay the price. Ultimately, it’ll come back to haunt you.

In verse seven, just two verses later, it says, “Do not be deceived. God is not mocked for you reap whatever you sow.” Whatever, there are consequences.

I actually found Dr. Cloud’s book by listening to an interview he did, and I was really struck by what little I understood about boundaries. He told this story and I thought it was a good one. It’s kind of a long one so hang in there. He wrote: “I would abolish the phrase *you need* from the English language. I would just make it illegal because that’s the kernel of nagging. Mom and Dad walk into the house and Johnny’s on the couch playing video games. All of a sudden Mom says, ‘You need to get up in your room and you need to do your homework and you need to get up off the couch.’ Johnny is feeling no need – no need to do any of those things. The only need he has is to get this psycho woman out of his face.”

“Now, you see that’s trying to control another person. See, nagging is trying to control somebody we can never control. It’s only going to frustrate everybody. But if Mom took control of herself and controlled the things she could control and went in and said, ‘Johnny, here’s the deal. Tomorrow we’re going to go to the NFL game. Your dad’s going to go, I’m going to go, and our sister is going to go. We’re going to have a great time and we want you to go. Here’s the way it works. Everybody is going to get to go who’s done their chores by 6:00 o’clock today. And we’re going to have an inspection,

and your homework's done and the things I asked you to do in the bac yard is done, you're going to get to go with us. It's going to be great. Now you can choose not to do that. That's fine, that's up to you. We want you to come but if you don't want to well, then you don't have to. Do you remember Mabel, the Babysitter from Hell? Do you remember her? Well, I called her and she's available tomorrow. And if you choose option B then you'll spend the day with Mabel while we go to the game.”

“And then Mom says, ‘Well, I have to run – I have my chores to do.’ And she walks out and all of a sudden Johnny has a thought to through his head he hasn't ever had before. He thinks, ‘I need to do my homework.’ Now Johnny has a need.”

Now I can hear parents out here rolling their eyes as I said it. They'll say, “I've tried that, and it doesn't always work.” And that's true, it's true. But the basic concept is that whatever – there are consequences. And what God has done for us is said, “You can live with the consequences of your life. I'm not going to take them away. I'm not going to fix everything in your life. You can live with those consequences. I'm going to love you no matter what but whatever – there are consequences.”

Here's the third law then and it's where it starts at the beginning. “Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” What's the law of Christ? Well, it's the law of love. “Love the Lord your God with all your mind, your soul, your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” To live out that law of love.

You see, there's a difference between being responsible *for* someone, for the life of someone else, and being responsible *to* someone else to love them. To be responsible to love them is to say “I'm going to always love you and I'll do whatever I can for you. But I can't take over your life for you.”

Maybe one of the ways to help us understand this is to look at the Greek words in this particular passage. Which is it? Are they going to bear their own load or are we going to bear their burdens? Well the words that are used there are actually different. The word for burden when it says, “Bear one another's burden” is the word *baros* and that word literally means excess weight. Excess weight. In fact, it's often used in Greek for trouble. Do you have *baros*? Do you have trouble in your life? While the word for load is *phortion* which means “a freight.” It's what you usually carry, your daily tasks, your obligations. One is trouble and one is just your obligations.

I like to think of the obligations as your backpack, or your knapsack. This is the stuff you have to carry, no one's going to carry for you. You have to do your part. But trouble says that sometimes life gets more than you can bear. And the people around you who love you step in and say, "Let me help." See, boundaries have gates in them – gates that we step through sometimes to help other people to carry the burdens of life. To walk with them through that. To show them the law of love.

With our outreach team we read a book called *Toxic Charity* and the point of it is that sometimes when we try to help people, we're really hurting them. We're stepping in so we can pat ourselves on the back about being the great helpers. When the truth is what we need to do is help build infrastructures so they can help themselves. So they own that and then carry their own loads as they say.

So sometimes the law of love is about drawing a boundary.

Now let me just point you to a chart that's there in your Sermon Notes because it's been helpful to me as I've tried to study this. One of the ways to think about boundaries and using them appropriately, having some that are permeable is to say, "Can you say no or can you say yes?" So for example some of you can't say no and we have some of you in the church and we use you a lot. We call on you all of the time. We think, "Let's call on them – they can't say no! We need something done!"

But what happens is that after a while you begin to feel manipulated and used and you feel guilty when you do say no. Or you might be the kind of person who can't hear someone say no. So you're going to fix everybody You want to step in and do this. And then your kids might say, "Mom, just let us be. Dad, give us a break." We'd say, "Well, what you need to do is this..."

It may be that you can't say yes so you've got this boundary that says, "I'm not going to help anybody. They need to learn to help themselves after all." Or maybe you're the kind of person who doesn't hear someone say yes. You might think, "I'm going to help myself. I don't need anyone's help." As you go spiraling down.

Friends, here's the best news. We have the best model there is for this and that's God himself, who says to us, "You're responsible for your life and I'm going to love you and help you in any way I can, but I can't be responsible for it. You've got to live it. And I

want to pour myself into you and support you and be a part of your life. But you're got free will."

We have a Jesus who says, "You can torture me and hang me on a cross but I'm not going to stop loving you. Your behavior won't dictate mine. Because this is what God's called me to do."

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, we confess that it's hard for us to figure out these boundaries. It's not simple, so we need your guidance and wisdom, each and every day as we negotiate these relationships with our children, and our friends and families and our workmates. To know what we're responsible for and what we're not, how we can love and not take over someone's life. God, show us how. You've loved us and yet let us live our lives, and we just want to learn to live and love like you. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*