

## 5 Setting Boundaries with Yourself

Boundaries would be easy to set and maintain, if it weren't for all these people who make it difficult for us. They step into our way and overthrow everything we had so carefully planned. They catch us off-guard in our most vulnerable moments and just make it impossible for us to live the balanced life that we all so much desire. They even get into our way when it comes to our Christian walk. Life would just be so much easier without them.

In this section we want to discuss how to deal with the most difficult of these people. Who do you think is our worst enemy – the one who gives us the most problems?

When you ask this question you will receive all kinds of answers. People might name their bosses or colleagues at work, or people who used to be their friends, their relatives – particularly in-laws, their children or parents, and sadly enough their own husbands or wives. It is true – these people can give us a lot of trouble. The closer they are to us, the more vulnerable we are to what they do to us, and sometimes they can cause us a lot of pain. But the real enemy sits much closer.

As an illustration I will read to you a column from the Ann Landers page which, as so often, points at the most common problems in human life.

A very weird thing has happened. A strange old lady has moved into my house. I have no idea who she is, where she came from, or how she got in. All I know is that one day, she wasn't there, and the next day, she was.

She is a clever old lady, and manages to keep out of sight for the most part, but whenever I pass a mirror I catch a glimpse of her. And whenever I look in the mirror to check my appearance, there she is, hogging the whole thing, completely obliterating my gorgeous face and body. That is very rude. I have tried screaming at her but she just screams back.

If she insists on hanging around, the least she could do is offer to pay part of the rent, but no. Every once in a while I find a dollar bill stuck in a coat pocket, or some loose change under a sofa cushion, but it is not nearly enough.

I don't want to jump to conclusions, but I think she is stealing money from me. I go to the ATM and withdraw \$100, and a few days later it's all gone. I certainly don't spend money THAT fast, so I can only conclude the old lady is pilfering from me.

You'd think she would spend some of that money to buy wrinkle cream. Lord knows she needs it. And money isn't the only thing she is stealing. Food seems to disappear at an alarming rate – especially the good stuff like ice cream, cookies, and candy.

I can't seem to keep that stuff in the house anymore. She must have a real sweet tooth, but she'd better watch it, because she is really packing on the pounds. I suspect she realizes this, and to make herself feel better, she is tampering with my scale to make me think I am putting on weight, too.

For an old lady, she is quite childish. She likes to play nasty games, like going into my closets when I'm not home and altering my clothes so they don't fit. And she messes with my files and papers so I can't find anything. This is particularly annoying since I am extremely neat and organized. She also fiddles with my VCR so it does not record what I have carefully and correctly programmed.

She has found other imaginative ways to annoy me. She gets into my mail, newspapers, and magazines before I do and blurs the print so I can't read it. And she has done something real sinister to the volume controls of my TV, radio, and telephone. Now, all I hear are mumbles and whispers.

She has done other things – like making my stairs steeper, my vacuum cleaner heavier and all my knobs and faucets harder to turn. She even made my bed higher so that getting into and out of it is a real challenge. Lately, she has been fooling with my groceries before I put them away, applying glue to the lids, making it almost impossible for me to open the jars. Is this any way to repay my hospitality?

She has taken the fun out of shopping for clothes. When I try something on, she stands in front of the dressing room mirror and monopolizes it. She looks totally ridiculous in some of those outfits, plus, she keeps me from seeing how great they look on me.

Just when I thought she couldn't get any meaner, she proved me wrong. She came along when I went to get my picture taken for my driver's license, and just as the camera shutter clicked, she jumped in front of me! No one is going to believe that the picture of that old lady is me.

We may think this complaint is just funny or is only a senior's sentiment. But sadly enough this is how people sometimes feel about who is creating all the mess in their lives. We like to think our problems are caused by others. We like to put the blame on somebody else instead of admitting that our worst enemy is us. But the truth is – the one who is really bringing us into trouble is inside us.

Although we hate to admit it, *we* are the ones who break the limits. *We* are the ones who do not do what is right but instead do what we know to be bad. As Paul puts it in **Romans 7:18-19,21**:

I know that nothing good lives in me. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

## 5.1 Boundary Problems with Ourselves

Let us take a look at some of the most common problems that we have with ourselves. What are the areas where we tend to lack control over ourselves?

1. *Eating*: in the Western society overeating is probably the most common problem that adults have to face. Food is available in abundance and we find it difficult to say no to it, even if we are not hungry anymore. It is just too seductive.

In general this is not yet a bad thing, but for quite a few people overeating has become a real problem. They can't control their appetite anymore and eat much more than is good for them. What makes it especially painful for them is not only that they feel guilty after they have given in to the call of the refrigerator – even worse, more than any other addiction (even more than drugs and alcohol), the addiction to food becomes clearly visible to others. Overweight people feel an enormous shame about their condition and their behavior and that usually drives them away from healthy relationships and back to the food that promises them comfort.

Chronic and bingeing overeaters – like all addicts – suffer from an internal self-boundary problem. They use food as substitute for close relationships, sometimes even as an excuse for avoiding intimacy. The comfort from food is less scary to them than the prospect of having to deal with *real* relationships, where setting boundaries would be necessary. Some people find it easier to run away from having to do that.

**Proverbs 23:21** says that the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty. While food should be enjoyed as a blessing from God, there is no blessing in the extreme.

2. *Money*: people today are on average richer than they were ever before. We take luxuries for granted that our grandparents could only dream of. But has that made life easier for us? Unfortunately not. People have tremendous problems when it comes to dealing with money, such as:

- (a) Impulse spending
- (b) Careless budgeting or not budgeting at all
- (c) Living beyond their means
- (d) Credit problems
- (e) Chronic borrowing from friends
- (f) Working more to pay the bills

Most people would tell you that they don't have enough and that just a little more money would solve all their problems. But the problem is not that they don't *have* enough, but that they don't know how to be responsible with what they have. It is not the high cost of living, but the *cost of high living*.

God has given us money as a blessing, not as a ruler over us. He gave it to us to put it to good use: **give and it will be given unto you (Luke 6:38)**. So the money itself is not the problem, but our love for it, for **the love of money is the root of all evil (1. Timothy 6:10)**. Jesus urges us not to be slaves of the mammon (**Luke 16:13**) but to strive for a treasure in heaven (**Luke 12:33**). But if we have difficulties saying no to our desire for money and spending more than we should, we quickly become someone else's servant, for **The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender (Proverbs 22:7)**.

3. *Time*: Many people feel that their time is out of their control. They are constantly busy and always at the edge of deadlines. They find little time to relax and their friends and colleagues consider them unreliable because they are always late or sometimes don't even show up at all.

**Ecclesiastes 3:1–8** tells us that there is a time for everything and a season for every activity. Yet we try to squeeze in more and more busyness into the time we have and miss out on the balanced life that we could have. This problem is not new. **Ecclesiastes 3:9** already asks the question "What does the worker gain from his toil?" and **Ecclesiastes 4:8** points it out even stronger:

There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

Today's society puts a high value of being busy. But this is not the reason why we have problems with time. The real causes for these problems lie in us, and not in what is expected from us.

- (a) *Omnipotence*: many people have unrealistic expectations of what they can accomplish in a given amount of time. "No problem – I'll do it" is their motto, and sometimes they add "I'll do it for the Lord" to give their lack of boundaries a religious touch. But later they find out that it costs them much more time than they expected.
- (b) *Over-responsibility*: some people are overly sensitive for the feelings of others. They think that leaving a party or a church event early might hurt others. So they stay until everything has been cleaned up and neglect other, more important tasks.
- (c) *Lack of realistic anxiety*: some people live so much in the present that they simply don't plan ahead for traffic parking or other little delays that one should usually expect on the way to an important event.
- (d) *Rationalization*: some people minimize the inconvenience they cause for others. They think "they are my friends – they'll understand". While this may be true if you are late once, your friends will have little understanding for chronic lateness, because you regularly steal time from them that they certainly could have spent better than just in waiting for you.

A person with undeveloped time boundaries does not only inconvenience others but ends up frustrating him- or herself. The day ends with unrealized desires, half-baked projects and the realization that tomorrow will be another day full of stress and running behind schedule.

4. *Task Completion*: is a first cousin to the time boundary problem. We would all like to say what Paul said in **2. Timothy 4:7–8**:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:  
Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.

But many Christians find themselves to be unable to be good finishers. They always start with a lot of enthusiasm, but when it comes to finishing they fail, even if they have enough time. There may be several reasons for that.

- (a) *Resistance to structure*: they don't like to submit to the discipline of a plan. They either deviate from it constantly or have none at all.
- (b) *Fear of success*: they are afraid that others may envy and criticize them. They rather shoot themselves in the foot than exposing themselves to that.
- (c) *Lack of follow-through*: they have an aversion to the boring details of a project. They are more excited about birthing the idea than actually executing it.

- (d) *Distractability*: they are unable to focus on a single project but always go off to do something else, which may or may not be important.
- (e) *Inability to say no to other pressure*: they give in to the demands of other people and projects instead of finishing first what that promised to do.
- (f) *Desire for instant gratification*: they can't work through the pain of a project and wait for the satisfaction of having a job well done. They want the gratification right away and give up if it doesn't come quickly.

People with serious task completion problems are in some sense like 2-year olds in their favorite toy area. They pick up a book, play with the toy car, talk to a puppet – all in one minute. They haven't grown out of that stage enough to keep focused on finishing things well.

5. *The tongue*: Putting a boundary on what they are saying is a problem for quite a few people. Our words can deeply affect the quality of our relationships. Our tongue can be a source of blessing and curse (**James 3:9–10**). It is a blessing when we encourage, emphathize, or even confront others. This is what God expects from us. But it becomes a curse if we

- (a) Talk nonstop
- (b) Dominate conversations to control others
- (c) Gossip
- (d) Make sarcastic remarks (indirect hostility)
- (e) Threaten (direct hostility)
- (f) Flatter instead of authentic praise
- (g) Seduce

Many people are not even aware that they have difficulty taming their tongue. But the Bible admonishes us over and over to do so.

If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check (**James 3:2**)

When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. (**Proverbs 10:19**)

A man of knowledge uses words with restraint. (**Proverbs 17:27**)

Taming the tongue is difficult, particularly if our emotions get hold of us. But we do have the power to control it – if we want to. If we don't control our words, we will have a hard time mustering self-control in any other area of our life. Our tongue is the key. If you find it difficult to control yourself in some area of your life, your use of words is probably one of the reasons for that.

Our tongue is the reflection of our heart (**Matthew 15:18–19**). It reveals what is going on inside. It is certainly worth restraining it, if the words that would come out are negative and destructive. We should keep in mind that a careless

word, once spoken, can never be undone. Words do matter, because they can create a great deal of damage – and God will hold us responsible for that.

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. (**Matthew 12:36**)

However, mastering our tongue does not simply mean hiding our thoughts but dealing with the evil inside us.

6. *Sexuality*: sexual problems, especially for men, are more common among Christians than we like to admit. Almost all of Paul's letters admonish Christians to abstain from sexual immorality and the Church has preached against it for centuries. But that doesn't mean that sexual immorality doesn't exist anymore. It has always been there and still exists today – we just don't dare to talk about it. The reason for that is simple. People caught up in out-of-control sexual behavior usually feel shameful and isolated. They believe they are the only ones having a problem with their sexuality, so they are afraid of being judged if they are honest about their problem. And this keeps the problem in the darkness – exactly where Satan wants to have it, so that there can be no help or resolution. And so the sexuality takes on a life of its own – unreal, fantasy driven, insatiable. No matter how often the desire for sex is satisfied, it only deepens, and the inability to say no to one's lust drives one deeper into despair and hopelessness.
7. *Alcohol and Substance abuse*: is probably one of the clearest examples of boundary problems. It creates devastation in the life of the addicts with lifelong and debilitating effects. But nevertheless the addict by himself can do almost nothing to get out of this because the time when he was in control is over. He needs the loving, non-judgmental help of others and even then it will be difficult for him to get back to a normal life.

These seven areas aren't exhaustive, but they cover a great deal of territory in which we may experience lack of self-control. In a marriage relationship we will become aware of other, less obvious problems which usually don't show up when we are alone. We will discuss these later.

## 5.2 Why Can't We Simply Say No?

All these problems have in common that we almost feel forced to do things that we don't really want to do. We try to fight them, but that doesn't seem to work. We try to say no to them, but next time we behave exactly as before. Our no breaks down easily, and we feel defeated and frustrated with ourselves.

So before we discuss ways for establishing boundaries with ourselves, let us look at why a simple no – the most commonly attempted solution for such a problem – doesn't

work. What makes it so much more difficult to follow through with a no to ourselves than with a no to others?

1. *We are our own worst enemies:*

It is much easier to deal with an external problem than with an internal one. When we set limits in other people, we can do so because we are only responsible *to*, but not responsible *for* the other party. We can follow through with consequences if the other party does not respect our boundaries. For instance, when we are around a critical person, we can set limits on our exposure to this person's constant criticism: we can change the subject or leave the room.

But when we have to set boundaries on ourselves, we *are* the other party. What can we do if that critical person is in our head? Whatever we do, our enemy is always with us. How do we discipline such a person?

2. *We withdraw from relationship when we most need it:*

Ever since the fall people have had a tendency to withdraw from relationship when they were in trouble (**Genesis 3:8**), although this is the time when they need other people most. Because we feel insecure, ashamed of our thoughts or actions, or are too proud to seek help, we turn inward instead of outward. And this is what really makes it a problem. **Ecclesiastes 4:9–10** says

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

When we feel that we have lost control over ourselves, we often retreat to work out the problem. We do everything possible to get back under control and feel better. But most of our attempts fail quickly and we feel even more depressed and helpless than before. And we retreat further from others because we are afraid that others might look down on us when they see our weaknesses.

Yet, the only real solution is to bring our spiritual and emotional problems out of ourselves to the body of Christ. The trouble is that nothing feels more frightening and unwise and that we won't take that risk unless we feel very secure. I remember that as a young Christian it took me months to go to a Christian counselor and talk about the problems and sinful behaviors that I still hadn't resolved – just because I was ashamed of myself and afraid of what he might think of me.

However, there is no other answer to our problem than bringing it to the light. **James 5:16** recommends to

confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Grace and healing must come from the outside. Just as the branch withers apart from the vine (**John 15:4–6**), so will we wither emotionally and spiritually

without bonding to God and his people. Whatever our boundary problem is – food, substances, money, time, task completion, our tongue or sexuality – we can't solve it in a vacuum. If we could, we would have solved it a long time ago. But the more we isolate ourselves, the bigger our problems will become. Just like untreated cancer, self-boundary problems will only worsen unless we let others help us.

Of course, as Christians we are not only the ones who need help but also people who can give help. Therefore we should do everything to help others open up in our presence. We need to create an atmosphere of trust and let others feel that we won't judge them, no matter what problem they want to discuss with us, but that we are genuinely interested in helping them. This is not easy: how do you convince others that you are the person they can trust in and that you really care? It is something we need to learn step by step – our Discipleship program may be a first step in that direction.

3. *We try to use will-power to solve the problem:*

Another reason why our no doesn't work on self-boundary problem is that we try will-power to solve it. This approach is probably the most common attempt to deal with out-of-control behavior, but it doesn't work because it is overly simplistic: Whatever the problem behavior is – *just stop doing it*. “Just decide to say no”, “Make a commitment to never do it again”, “Choose to stop” – these are the imperatives that are so popular among Christians. But it simply doesn't work that way.

What is wrong with the will-power approach? The will to end our problem is certainly a prerequisite to solve it, but it is not sufficient. Believing that “just saying no” will solve the problem makes an idol of our will – something God never intended for us. Since the fall, our power to make the right decisions is not strong enough anymore (recall **Romans 7:18–21** and **John 15:5**). We can't make commitments alone but need the support of others. If our will were sufficient to fight evil, we wouldn't need a savior (**1. Corinthians 1:17**):

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

In **Colossians 2:20–23** Paul points out how little value human recommendations have, if they appeal to will-power alone.

Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, “Touch not; taste not; handle not”, which all are to perish with the using, after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

Self-denying practices may appear spiritual, but in truth they are will-worship and lack any value in restraining our misguided desire. The boundaryless part of our soul will only become more resentful under the domination of our will and rebel against it, which usually makes the problem worse.

### 5.3 How to Establish Boundaries With Ourselves?

So if using our will to end our self-boundary problem doesn't work, does that mean the situation is hopeless? Certainly not, because we have God on our side and nothing can separate us from his love (**Romans 8:35–39**). And if God is with us, he will give us the means and the people to overcome our problems – if we let him do so. Here is a checklist of 6 practical steps that can help us developing limits on our own out of control behavior. It begins with analyzing the problem and then shifts towards identifying solutions and finally practicing them.

#### 1. *What are the symptoms?*

The first step is to identify indicators for an out-of-control behavior. You may be experiencing anxiety, depression, panic, phobias, relationship struggles, rage, isolation, stress, problems at work, or psychosomatic problems like migranes, tension in your back, or stomach ache – to name a few. These symptoms *can* be (they don't have to) related to a difficulty in setting limits on your own behavior. Use them as road map to begin identifying the real problem.

#### 2. *What are the roots?*

The next step is to identify what may have caused these symptoms. That may assist you in understanding your own contribution to the problem and the external influences that may have played a role in it. Identifying these roots is not always easy, but reflecting on your past in the presence of God will help. Experience<sup>4</sup> shows us that in most cases the root for your problems can be found among the following possibilities.

- (a) *Lack of training*: some adults have never learned to accept limits, to bear the consequences of irresponsible behavior, or to delay gratification.
- (b) *False training*: people who grew up in dysfunctional families may have learned that out-of-control behavior brings reward. The family came together when the alcoholic parents started drinking, a father's rage brought him the submission of his wife, etc. These bad habits, once learned, are difficult to give up.

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<sup>4</sup>Psychology can be very helpful for detecting the roots of our problems. Psychologists have identified many common patterns in human behavior and are often in perfect agreement with biblical teachings. A Christian should not be afraid of taking advantage of these insights, but also be aware of the limitations of Psychology. It can be used to reveal problems and causes, but the solutions it offers are often in sharp contrast to the Bible: they help people to feel better and be more confident in their walk through life, but they do not address the real problem.

- (c) *Distorted need*: some problems are legitimate, God-given needs in disguise. For instance, God gave us sexual desire both to reproduce ourselves and to enjoy our spouses. But sexual addicts have diverted this good desire into something destructive. The same holds for food addicts, workaholics, perfectionists, etc.
- (d) *Fear of relationship*: people want to be loved but are afraid of what a relationship might bring them (vulnerability, responsibility, sexual intimacy, new temptations). They use overeating, overworking, or an uncontrolled tongue to keep others away. They don't do this consciously, but their fear is actually the driving force.
- (e) *Unmet emotional hunger*: adults who didn't receive true love during their first years, hunger for it for the rest of their lives. This hunger is so great that they don't find it in relationships with people but look for it in food, work, sex, or spending money.
- (f) *Being under the law*: too many Christians grew up in legalistic environments that did not permit them to make decisions for themselves. As adults they feel guilty when they try to make their own decisions, which often forces them to rebel against this guilt. Food addiction and compulsive spending are typical reactions to that.
- (g) *Covering emotional hurt*: people who were injured or abused emotionally cover their pain by eating, drinking, or working too much. That distracts them from the intolerable pain of feeling unloved, unwanted and alone.

Often these roots are more obvious to people who know you well. But they are usually too polite to tell you unless you ask them explicitly.

### 3. *What is the boundary conflict?*

In the light of your symptoms and roots, try to identify your specific boundary problems in relation to food, money, time, task completion, your tongue, sexuality, alcohol or substance abuse. There may be other areas as well – ask God for insight into what areas of your life are out of control. And don't be afraid of receiving an answer. Even if these insights may damage your image of your good self, they are the key to a solution. Most people who don't get out of an addiction do so because they deny its existence.

### 4. *Who needs to take ownership?*

At this point you have to take the painful step of taking responsibility for your behavior. Even if your boundary conflicts were caused by others – for instance family problems, neglect, or abuse – you are the one who needs to deal with them. It doesn't matter whether they are your fault or not – they are *your responsibility*.

This is a difficult step and our emotions may cry out against it. Why should we fix a problem that others caused in us?

Because nobody else will!

This is one of the situations where we need to live by the truth, regardless of what our emotions tell us. The problem is now ours and we are the ones responsible for addressing it.

#### 5. *What do you really need?*

Having identified the problem and realized that we have to take steps it is now time to actually do something about it. The question is how? What do you need to do?

People who ask themselves this question may quickly fall back into a do-it-yourself mentality. “I have found the problem, now let’s fix it”. As we have mentioned above, this approach won’t get them very far, because they try it alone. But it is useless to try to deal with self-boundary conflicts unless you are actively developing *safe, trusting, grace-and-truth relationships* with others. Without God’s source of spiritual and emotional fuel, you will quickly get stuck.

In **John 15:5b** Jesus reminds us that **apart from me, you can do nothing**. And **Ecclesiastes 4:9–10** admonishes us to work on difficult tasks together.

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

We need deep relationships with fellow Christians (*not just our own spouse!*) who help us work through our problems and lift us up again if we fail. That is why we are members of a local church – to build such relationships with at least one or two other Christians nearby. The sad truth is, however, that most people with self-boundary conflicts do not have these deep relationships. They are not rooted in God’s love, that we so desperately need.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. (**Ephesians 3:17b–18**)

So what they have to learn first, is to connect to other people and open up to them. This is not easy: finding the right people, group, or church is already hard enough – but admitting that you need their help may be even more difficult. I know that from my own experience.

But there is no alternative – we already discussed that. If you try to solve your problem alone, you will often end up trying to cure your symptoms, because they are the ones that give you the pain. But dealing with the symptoms only doesn’t provide the cure that you need. In general your problems will get much worse.

It is like taking pain killers: they may ease the pain for a while, but if you don't go to a doctor to cure the real disease, your pain will only get worse. You can't treat cancer just by taking pain killers.

Jesus gives an illustration of this process in **Luke 11:24–26**

When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

It is the same with our out-of-control lives. We may experience success and drive out those demons of addiction and uncontrolled behavior. But in isolation our soul will remain empty and is just waiting for new problems to enter. If we fight them alone, we will remain spiritually vulnerable. It is only when our house is full of the love of God and others that we can resist the temptations of the devil.

How can we build such relationships with other Christians? Surely there has to be more to it than just knowing each other from church. But our Sunday School class is one way to get started. We could also form smaller groups that regularly meet in our homes, or prayer partnerships – all a means to open ourselves up and to get to know each other better. If we really invest into being a friend we will eventually find somebody with whom we can bond.

## 6. *How to begin?*

After all these preparations you can finally practice setting boundaries on yourself. Here are some ways to begin.

### (a) *Address your real need:*

We mentioned before that an out-of-control behavior is often a disguise for a real need. You need to address that need and allow God to fill it, before you can do something about your behavior. For instance, compulsive spenders may find out that they use spending money as substitute for a loving, close relationship. As they work on building new relationships or improving the relationships they have, the need to buy things will slowly disappear.

While addressing your needs in a godly way you may realize that some of ways you have tried to fill your desires before were sinful. People who need money to buy things may not be totally honest with their taxes or insurance companies, keep things that don't belong to them, or even steal – while justifying these actions by saying that “I need it and it doesn't hurt anybody if I take this”.

You will not experience any progress if you cling to a sin or try to justify it. This is You have to let go of such twisted thinking or your life will be

miserable in one way or the other. **Psalm 32:3–4** gives an illustration of what your life would be like. The only way out is to confess your sin – that is to acknowledge your action as sinful and your willingness to let go of it.

I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. (**Psalm 32:5**)

**James 5:16** even recommends to confess our sins to each other so that we can pray for each other in a meaningful way.

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

I know this is difficult, because we are all afraid of gossip or being condemned by other Christians who appear so much more spiritual to us than we know ourselves to be. But confession is necessary for healing. God will forgive and only then we can start again

Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (**John 8:11b**)

(b) *Allow yourself to fail:*

Addressing your real need is no guarantee that your symptoms will disappear. Many people who address the real issue beneath their self-boundary problem are disappointed when their problem keeps recurring and are ready to give up. Was it all for nothing?

Certainly not. If God works in us, this doesn't mean we will solve our problem all at once. God may want you to deal with your tongue first, before you will see progress with spending or eating problems. Sanctification is a process, not an instantaneous event. And God's pace for us may be slower than we like it to be, because there are more issues to be dealt with than just this particular problem. If we want to mature as Christians, we need to continue to practice to learn new things and should never give up.

Learning better self-boundaries is like learning a new language: you need to embrace failure instead of trying to avoid it. If you try to avoid failure, you won't make any progress, because you can only avoid mistakes by doing nothing – and that is the greatest mistake of all (**Luke 19:20–23**). But when you stop worrying about your mistakes, you will be able to go on and learn from them.

(c) *Listen to emphatic feedback:*

As you fail in setting boundaries on yourself, you will need others to tell you about it in a caring way. Sometimes you will not even be aware of your own failure – particularly when your problem is controlling your tongue – or you don't really understand the damage you're causing in the lives of those you care about. I certainly don't see that unless I am being told. Other believers can provide perspective, correction, and support at the same time, if you allow them to watch over you.

Of course, the feedback you need is an emphatic one. Only people who make you aware of your irresponsible behavior in a non-condemning, non-nagging manner – even if they were the ones who had to suffer from it – have a chance to help you change. In **John 4:15–20** Jesus gives us a fascinating demonstration how this can be done. We need to be motivated by love, not by fear of somebody else’s criticism, if we want to make progress.

Biblically based support groups, which provide a loving and clear feedback, keep people responsible by letting them see the effects their actions have on another. We won’t help each other by sweeping problems under the rug or by knocking each other over the head for misbehavior. But we do help each other by telling the truth in love. It would be my long term goal to build up such a support group here in class, but that will require that we open up step by step and are not afraid of making mistakes or what others may think of us.

(d) *Welcome consequences as a teacher:*

Out-of-control behavior usually results in painful consequences for us. The overeater has medical and social difficulties; the overspender faces financial problems; the chronically late person misses meetings and loses friendships; an uncontrolled tongue results in relationship problems and loss of friends.

If we have to experience such consequences, we should not complain about them but welcome them as a chance to learn. They teach us that we have to suffer for irresponsible behavior and that the law of sowing and reaping is still in place. They give us a chance to turn away from our destructive behavior before it is too late.

Some people argue that a loving God would spare us the negative consequences of our failures. They ask why they are being punished, even when the relation between their actions and what happened to them is clearly visible. Does this suffering mean that God doesn’t love them?

On the contrary. Of course God wants to spare us the pain. But when his word and the warnings of other Christians don’t reach us, it is better to let us experience the consequences than letting us proceed and experience further damage. A loving God allows us to experience pain rather than letting us go on destroying ourselves.

(e) *Surround yourself with people who are loving and supportive:*

Loving support from other Christians is one of the most crucial aspects in building and maintaining self-boundaries. You need other people both for feedback and for encouragement. Your difficulties are too much to bear alone. You need others who will be loving and supportive, without rescuing you from the consequences of your actions.

Most people who try to support friends with self-boundary problems make one of two errors

- i. They become critical and parental, adopting an “I told you so” attitude. This causes their friends to avoid them and the chance for correction is gone. **Galatians 6:1** tells us to apply gentle restoration, not criticism.

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

- ii. They give in to their impulse to save their friends from suffering. They lend money where they shouldn't. They always wait for the late-comer even if that causes trouble for them.

Rescuing others is *not* a sign of love – it is the opposite. By bailing others out, you won't turn them into a loving and responsible person. You only take control over their lives. If you really love them, you will let them go through the consequences of their behavior – even if that means some suffering – but support them in every other possible way.

This five-point formula expresses a permanent cycle: you deal with your real needs, fail, receive feedback and suffer consequences, and are restored by the people around you. Each time you will build stronger internal boundaries and as you do, you will build a sense of self-restraint that can truly become a part of your life.

## 5.4 Learning Self-Control in Marriage: Becoming more Lovable

So far we have discussed how to address self-boundary problems that may affect both single and married people. We will now take a closer look at self-boundary problems in relationships. We will first discuss various reasons why we need to set boundaries on ourselves in a marriage. In the following sections we will then study two major areas in which we need to learn self-control. The first is deals with issues related to our own character and the other deals with limiting our desire to control our spouse.

### Resolve Relationship Problems – Whose Problem is It?

A first reason for setting limits on ourselves is that it helps us to resolve the problems, that we encounter in our relationships, in a proper and fruitful way. Every relationship, particularly one that is as close a marriage, goes through problems that result from the fact that two different people share their lives together.

There are different ways to address these problems. Unfortunately the most common approach is to blame others for the bad things that happen to us and expecting *them* to change their behavior. Usually, however, such an approach seldomly succeeds, because, after all, we're human. Let me illustrate that by an example.

Imagine your husband has a habit of working late. Every day you wait with dinner for him, but he never returns home on time. When you begin nagging him about his irresponsible behavior, he only becomes defensive and you get into an argument. He is angry at you and you at him. So what can you do? After all, you are clearly right and he is wrong. Don't you have every right to confront him about that?

No – because it leads nowhere. Experience clearly shows that nagging doesn't lead to change. It just creates a distance between you and your husband. So what can you really do?

The question you need to ask yourself whose problem you are trying to deal with here. Is his chronic lateness *your* problem? You may say “of course, because *I* have to suffer from it”. But think twice! What is the real problem you have here? Your problem is not his lateness, but the fact that you are unhappy with it. Your problem is that you are angry and that despite all the nagging you are still enabling him. *That* is your problem – not his chronic lateness.

But his time problem is not your problem – it is neither under your control nor your responsibility. Remember the laws of power and responsibility? You are not responsible for your husband's behavior nor do you have the power to change it. So, his lateness is *his* problem and *he* needs to deal with it – we just talked about that a while ago. And your responsibility is to work on *your* problem. (**Matthew 7:3–5**)

What does that mean?

First of all, you need to work on your attitude toward him. It won't be easy but you need to place limits on your anger when you feel that you have every right to confront your husband. Your attitude should be a loving one, not that of a judge. (**Matthew 7:1–2**)

And at the same time you need to stop enabling him, that it you need to set limits on your willingness to make it easy for him to come late. You need to be a bit creative here, depending on your family situation and the actual reasons for his being late. But you may have to go as far as starting to eat dinner with the kids alone and having him reheat his dinner when he comes home. If you do this with a loving, but firm attitude you may actually see changes that you would never achieve by nagging.

Why?

Because two things have changed. He now feels welcome at home instead of fearing your wrath when he is half an hour late. And at the same time *he* has become the one who bears the consequences of his lateness – not you and the kids. And if he doesn't like reheating food he may even try to rearrange his schedule so that he can be home when dinner is ready.

Do you see the difference? Instead of fear or guilt feelings, it is love and practical considerations that bring him home on time.

Now I can't guarantee that changing your reaction will always lead to a change in your husband's behavior. This is not what this is about. This class is not about changing or fixing your spouse or making him do anything specific. It is about bringing boundaries

into a relationship to provide an environment in which both of you can grow.

So what if he doesn't change – if he still comes late? There may be all kinds of reasons for this and in some rare cases he may actually have no control over his schedule – although these cases are really rare because much of our pressure at work is self-made as well. But nevertheless, even if he still will be late you will notice that your relationship has changed to the better, because you have worked on *your* problem, namely your anger and unhappiness, and he will be closer to you because of that.

### Why Me?

So, even if the problem that we're dealing with was clearly caused by somebody else, we need to learn how to set boundaries on *ourselves* if we want to see our problem solved. Probably we don't like that idea at all. Why should we deny ourselves certain freedoms to solve a problem that we didn't cause? There are several reasons for this:

- First of all God commands us to be the ones who take the first step to solve a problem. If our brother has something against us, *we* have to go to him and settle the problem (**Matthew 5:23–24**). If he sins against us, *we* are to go to him (**Matthew 18:15**). Fault is irrelevant – we are the ones that should do something about it – that is the law of action in practice.
- Second, we need to realize that more often than not, we are not totally blameless. We may view ourselves as innocent victims but in reality we play an active or passive role in the problem that makes it even worse.

It may seem weird, but quite a few people need to be able to look down onto their spouse's behavior to feel good about themselves. They even get some form of reward out of the irresponsible behavior of their spouse: they don't have that character flaw that their spouses display and that makes them feel morally superior. Deep inside they are not interested in changing that.

The Pharisee in **Luke 18:10–12** is a good example for such a mind set and even in today's Christians we can observe this more often than we may believe. We may not admit it, but sometimes our inner prayer goes like this:

*Dear God, I thank you that I am not like the worldly people in this town. I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't take drugs, I don't commit adultery. Every Sunday I go to church and I give a tenth of my income to you.*

or

*Dear God, I thank you that I am not like this husband of mine. I don't come home late, I don't leave a mess in this house, I don't have fits of rage. I am the only responsible person in our house, I am selfless, submissive, and I sacrifice everything for this relationship.*

It is so easy to fall into such an attitude towards the people around us, particularly those close to us. But do you think God likes that? Jesus tells us to take the plank of self-righteousness out of our own eyes before we go on removing the speck from our spouse's eye (**Matthew 7:5**).

So our willingness to set limits on ourselves enables us to take ownership of the problems that *we* have in our relationships. When we cease to blame others for the bad things that happen, when we stop trying to fix the behavior of others and take an active role in addressing *our* problem, then we become empowered to solve it. It doesn't matter who *caused* our problem – *we* are the ones who need to make a change.

### **Take Ownership of Our Own Lives**

Another important aspect of setting boundaries with ourselves is that it enables us to take ownership of our own lives. We need to take responsibility not just for our problems, but also for our heart, soul, and character. **Ephesians 4:15** tells us that we need to grow spiritually.

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ

Our growth is our job and no one else's. However, this is not so easy because we are more concerned about the problems we see in others – particularly our spouse – than the state of our own soul. But when we neglect setting limits on ourselves, we have limited our *own* spiritual growth. We waste our energy on changing somebody else instead of investing it into the person that we *can* change. Let me give a few examples.

1. Your husband is angry and you withdraw.
2. You feel resentment at his irresponsibility.
3. He is inattentive and therefore you let go of your responsibilities.
4. You become self-centered because he is.

In all four cases you react to sinful behavior of your husband. But does this reaction help you grow? Obviously not, because what you are seeking here is satisfaction from your spouse instead of God's kingdom and his righteousness. However, Jesus tells us in **Matthew 6:33**:

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Your emotions may tell you that you have every right to react to your husband in this way. But the truth is that you will only damage your relationship and – even worse – your own soul. (**Philippians 4:8**)

We need to become more concerned about our own issues and not so much about the issues of our spouse. God hasn't given us the mission to fix our spouse – he has given us the task to seek his kingdom and his righteousness. And one day he will call us to account for what we have made out of our lives here on earth.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. (2. Corinthians 5:10)

And at that meeting we will not be able to blame our spouse for his or her sinful behavior – we still have to answer the question “what have *you* done to grow?”.

### Avoid the Dangers of Playing the “Good” Spouse

Another aspect of setting limits with ourselves arises in unbalanced relationships where one spouse is more obviously selfish, irresponsible, withdrawn, or controlling. The other is perceived as the *suffering saint* who has to tolerate the pain of living with such a problem person. This perception makes it very hard for the “good” spouse to set boundaries for himself. There are a number of reasons for that.

1. First, the suffering spouse focuses more on his spouse’s problems than on his own. The former are more apparent but as long as he focuses on them his own, less apparent problems, are not being dealt with.
2. Second, the “good” spouse often feels helpless in the relationship. No matter how hard he tries to be more loving and caring, there will be little progress, as long as he lacks truthfulness, honesty, limits, and consequences.
3. Third and most dangerous, the “good” spouse can easily feel morally superior because his contributions to the relationship problem are less obvious. He may even think that he is not capable to be as destructive as his mate, but this is a very dangerous position. **1. Corinthians 10:12** warns us

Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

Any time we focus on our goodness, we turn our hearts away from our own need for love and forgiveness. If instead we set limits on perceiving ourselves as suffering saints, we will be able to see what we need to do to solve our own problem in the relationship.

### Learn to Live by the Same Rules

Another reason for becoming able to set limits on ourselves is our need to subject ourselves to the same rules that we want our partner to submit to. We can only experience a growing and mutual relationship if we are living by the same rules that we expect from our spouse. If we play the judge for our spouse, but do what we want, our hypocrisy will eventually break down any good influence on our spouse.

If you don’t set limits on your own behavior, there is little chance that you will see your spouse put limits on a behavior that you don’t like in him. If you complain about his chronic lateness but do not look at your own controlling tendencies; or if you become angry when he withdraws from you – are you playing by the same rules? Why should he change if you demand of him what you aren’t doing yourself? Jesus tells us over and over again to do to others what we want to be done to us:

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. **(Luke 6:31,37-38)**

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself **(Matthew 22:39)**

Of course, you may say that you are only reacting to what your spouse does wrong, but that is a pretty lame excuse. No matter what he does wrong, it doesn't give you the right for irresponsible behavior.

But if you begin setting limits on your own behavior and show a genuine concern for your spouse, there is a good chance that he will begin to put limits on his own ego and move back into a closer relationship with you.

Who is to go the first step? That should be obvious by now.

### **Free Your Spouse**

The final reason for setting limits on yourself is that these limits create an environment in which your spouse is free to choose and grow. It is quite tempting to try to change your spouse because all his flaws and weaknesses are so clearly visible to you. But nagging, playing the blame game, or even complying to provoke some reaction are futile in helping your spouse to grow. What you're doing here is trying to control him and he will only react to that instead of addressing his real needs. He will be more concerned with staying free and defending himself against your attempts to control him than with solving the problems that you pointed out to him.

You cannot make your spouse grow up. That is between him and God. But he stands a better chance of changing if you let him experience both the love and the limits he needs, because he can now choose freely whether he wants to face the natural consequences of his immaturity. If you set limits on your desire to control him, you both will experience a life in truth.

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. **(John 8:32)**

## **5.5 Setting Boundaries with Our Own Character**

In a relationship there are two major areas in which we need to set boundaries with ourselves. The first deals with our lack of control over our own character, the other with our desire to exercise control over others. The highest calling of a man and a woman in a marriage is the call to love.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. **(Matthew 22:37-40)**

Love means that you do everything you can for your spouse, and one of the most loving things you can do for your spouse is working on your *own* character weaknesses while at the same time giving up the desire to control your spouse instead of yourself.

For most people a marriage begins just the other way around – we try to work on the weaknesses of our spouse and have no desire to control ourselves. But when you grow in love and faith, you become more tender and emphatic, yet more honest and firm in your convictions – and thus someone who is better to live with.

Of course, we cannot just will ourselves into maturity. Our will, as we discussed a while ago, is not strong enough to deal with our weaknesses. We will always experience defeat if we try to deal with our faults using sheer will-power. However, we can learn to be truthful about our faults and weaknesses, choose to repent of them and work them out. Often you need to take a troublesome emotion, behavior, or attitude and decide to work on it with the support of your spouse instead of trying to deal with it alone or – even worse – letting it control you.

Maturing in a relationship will be a life-long process and you will never reach perfection. Yet, over the years you will see a great deal of progress if you decide to set limits on your own character. Here are some issues on which you can set limits.

1. *Playing God*: By nature we try to play God instead of seeking him. Since the fall, we want to be like God (**Genesis 3:5**), determining ourselves what is good and what is evil – for us and for others. *We* want to be in control instead of submitting to a higher authority. We worship ourselves and want other people, particularly our spouse to praise us. We hate to admit this, but even as Christians we still want to play God ourselves. This is the worst and most hurtful aspect of our character, because we miss the mark in loving and caring about our spouse. We need to continually submit this part of ourselves to God. We can't fight our desire to play God ourselves – because even that attempt means playing God again. The only way out is asking God for help.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.

**(Romans 6:12–14)**

We cannot overemphasize how important it is for us to practice spiritual disciplines like worship, prayer, Scripture reading, and Christian fellowship. Only God's presence in us will limit our sin. The moment we try it on our own, we will fail again. But if we do, we should not give up, but immediately go back into God's presence. Only he can lift us up and lead us out of our sin.

2. *Denial*: One of the biggest problems for a relationship is a lack of truthfulness. When you do not admit the truth about who you really are, you disconnect yourself from your spouse and her love. When you deny your struggles, problems, and sins your spouse cannot relate to you and have compassion for your weakness. If, for instance, you hide a struggle with insecurity by attempting to be strong, you will have to face that insecurity alone.

Even worse, your spouse will have little understanding for the mistakes you make as a result of it, because she can't see what is hiding behind your mask of strength. And then a vicious cycle begins. You try to be even stronger, because you are afraid that she will not accept your weaknesses when she sees who you really are and you disconnect further from her. This is exactly where Satan wants to have you – alone, without support from your spouse and other Christians.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (**1. John 1:8–9**)

You need to set limits on your desire to deny who you really are. The opposite of denial is confession, or being truthful about yourself. Confession can be a humiliating experience, but it connects you emotionally with your spouse again. It allows her to minister to you and express her love in areas where you really need her. And you will be surprised – most people who came out of their denial received a warm welcome instead of the condemning judgment they expected. Your spouse may criticize you for your failures, but she will understand the great risk you take when you admit your weaknesses.

It still won't be easy – I have to learn a lot here myself – but this is an area where we need to trust God's promises more than our fears. It seems paradox, but when I am weak, then am I strong (**2. Corinthians 12:10**).

3. *Withdrawal from Relationship*: Closely related to denial is a failure to make and keep emotional connections. There may be numerous reasons for a spouse to pull away and avoid being open and vulnerable with the other. Some people have basic trust problems; others fear being controlled or hurt; still others can only set boundaries with their spouse by setting limits on the relationship itself.

Withdrawal often manifests itself as emotional absence. You may be physically present but still not there for your spouse. Or you may be able to give love and support but unable to receive it. Or you may disconnect when the relationship becomes too deep and emotional for you.

Whatever the cause and whatever the manifestation: if you allow this withdrawal to continue, you condemn your marriage to slow starvation. Marriage requires love to sustain itself. If you find yourself enticed by withdrawal, you need to learn setting boundaries on this tendency. Here are a few hints how:

- (a) Let your spouse help you. Ask her to let you know when you pull away and how it affects her. Does it hurt her or make her feel lonely? Become aware of the consequences of your withdrawal will help you limiting it.
- (b) Find out *why* you withdraw. Do you fear rejection, being controlled, or being judged? Are you punishing your spouse for hurting you?
- (c) Practice exposing yourself to others, particularly (but not only) to your spouse. This can help you make new emotional connections and overcome your tendency to avoid relationships.

4. *Irresponsibility*: Ever since the fall we have tried to avoid taking responsibility for our lives or to avoid the consequences of our actions. We all have this desire but some of us have not yet learned to set limits on it. They go through life arguing that it is not fair that they have to shoulder their own burdens. Instead of making the best out of the circumstances that God gave them to live in, they only complain about them. They blame others for everything they do wrong. They leave projects and tasks undone for someone else to finish up. They argue when others say no to them, particularly when they don't bail them out of a difficult situation.

If you have problems with responsibility, you severely limit the freedom of your spouse. You may not even recognize that you have a problem here, but your spouse will surely notice. Here is what you can do about it.

- (a) Allow people to confront you on your irresponsibility. Ask them to let you know when you cause them trouble. It will help you change if they do so in a loving way.
- (b) Accept feedback and consequences. Tell others to stop enabling you, even if that will have unpleasant consequences for you. It will help you structure your life better.
- (c) Ask your spouse to love you but at the same time set limits on you when you don't set them on yourself. Neither silence nor nagging will help you.

5. *Self-Centeredness*: Nothing is more natural than thinking more about your own situation than another's. However, looking at everything only from the perspective of what it means for us is one of the most destructive character issues in a marriage. Marriage cannot be successful unless we give more of ourselves than we are comfortable with. Yet, some people – particularly young men – go into a marriage relationship believing that they can essentially continue to live with the responsibilities of a single person while enjoying the conveniences of a married life. The result is that their spouse often feels like an object instead of a partner and that her thoughts and values aren't valued.

The structure of marriage is anti-selfish. As we become one flesh, we expose our weaknesses to each other and become painfully aware of the limitations of our own goodness. We have to give up our independent ways and the idea that everything revolves around *us*. Unless we address our own self-centeredness, our marriage will suffer severely from it. Here are some ideas to help set boundaries on it.

- (a) Ask your spouse to let you know when he has the impression that things aren't mutual between you, or when he thinks that you constantly expect him to see reality your way. It will not be easy to accept when he actually tells you so, but it can be a real eye-opener for you.
- (b) Learn to let go of the desire to be perfect or special. You don't have to be better than others to be loved. Your spouse doesn't love you for your beauty, talents, or accomplishments. You need to mature from the misconception that love depends on things that fail as you grow older, and to accept being loved for *who you are*.
- (c) Learn forgiveness and grief. They will help you to accept that you are not the center of the universe and that your spouse will fail you quite often.

6. *Judgmentalism*: Many people struggle with a tendency to judge, criticize and condemn others, particularly the people that are close to them. They see everything as black and white and have difficulties accepting that other people are different from them. Out of a strong need to be loved, they often misread a person's actions and see evil motives behind them: they hate both the sin and the sinner. Nothing kills love in a marriage more than judgmentalism. When you live with a judge, you're always on trial and fear the wrath of your spouse. Love cannot grow in such a climate of fear.

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not perfect in love. (**1. John 4:18**)

That doesn't mean you shouldn't confront your spouse about his behavior and let him experience the consequences of his actions. Love usually grows where there is discipline. But the fear of punishment is very different from that. If you pass judgment on his very soul and character you cast both out of your relationship. If you condemn him as a person you kill all the love between you.

The Bible explicitly forbids us to judge other people but tells us to forgive.

Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. (**Luke 6:37**)

What can you do to grow out of the position of being the judge in your marriage?

- (a) As usual, ask for feedback. How does your attitude hurt those you love, particularly your spouse. Judgmental people often don't realize how wounding they can be.

- (b) Become aware of your attacking conscience. Most judgmental people have a strong internal judge who condemns them for almost everything they do. Learn to receive compassion and forgiveness, both from God and others.
- (c) Learn to distinguish between sin and sinners. Develop compassion for the faults of others. Learn to forgive them instead of condemning them for what they have done to you. And forgiving means forgetting as well: you make a commitment to never ever bring the sins of the past up again.

I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.  
**(Jeremiah 31:34)**

Remember that you need a great deal of forgiveness yourself.

## 5.6 Limiting our Desire to Control

Of all the aspects of ourselves we need to set limits on in a marriage, our tendency to control our spouse is probably the most crucial. Many people – particularly young women – go into a marriage believing that they are God’s chosen tool to change their spouse into a better person. They think that their marriage would surely be blessed if only their spouse would change and the manipulations and strategies they employ for this mission are endless. Yet, the attempts to exercise control over a spouse are almost a sure-fire way to destroy trust and love in a marriage. Love must grow freely and independent of a “correct” behavior. Where people feel controlled by their spouse, freedom disappears and so does love.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. **(Galatians 5:1)**

What are the indicators that you are attempting to control your spouse?

1. *Not respecting the other’s no.* You make several attempts to change the position of your spouse or react very strongly to it.
2. *Punishing a wrong choice.* When your spouse does something that you don’t like, you become angry or send guilt messages.
3. *Not valuing freedom.* You are more interested in getting the “right” choice out of your spouse instead of a free, heartfelt one.
4. *Bad results.* Your spouse becomes resentful to you, acts out, or retaliates.

If even God, the only one who could justifiably control our decisions, refrains from doing so, then we should do the same. Our spouse will never be able to love us without that costly freedom.

In the rest of this section we look at the ways we attempt to control our mates and then discuss how to set boundaries on this tendency.

### 5.6.1 Control Comes in Different Flavors

The tendency to control a spouse is not only present in people that we might typically label as controllers as characterized in Section 3.3. Many people have no difficulties respecting the boundaries of other people as long as they don't have a very close relationship with them. It is the closeness of the marriage relation that reveals our tendency to take freedom from others rather than see our own freedom in danger.

Some of us have a very low threshold: they see a threat to their own freedom whenever their spouses are different from them. So they try to control their spouse, assuming that this would minimize the differences and thus strengthen the bond between them. Unfortunately, the opposite will happen.

Let us look at the most common ways in which we try to control our spouse and their destructive consequences on our relationships

1. *Guilt*: Guilt messages shall make our spouse feel responsible for our well-being. They create the impression that our spouse's freedom injures us and that his choice to be different is unloving. Statements like "If you would really love me, you would ...", "I wouldn't have to suffer so much if you weren't so selfish", "Why did you ever marry me?" – whether expressed openly or more indirect, wounded silences whenever there is a difference are used to convey the message. Some people even have a nervous breakdown or develop migranes or other physical pain just to express to their spouse: "Look what you have done to me".

Guilt messages are very destructive for your marriage because your spouse will feel both guilty and manipulated at the same time. Whether he gives in to you or not, he will not be happy about the outcome and *resentment* against you will grow.

2. *Anger*: Anger is our basic form of protest that we cannot control the reality around us. It can be direct, like an outburst of aggressive emotions, or covert as in sarcastic remarks. Sometimes it involves threats of retaliation. In extreme cases it can even become abusive and thus very dangerous for the other spouse.

Anger may cause your spouse to fear you and to comply with your demands. But it may also backfire and result in a severe fight. Either way, your spouse will build up *defenses* against you and the *distance* between you will grow.

3. *Assaults on boundaries*: Some people simply cannot respect their spouse's no and make attempt after attempt to change the other's mind. They argue and plead until the other is worn down and finally gives in.

Persistent assaults on your spouse's boundaries will make your spouse feel towards you as you feel about a strong-willed salesperson who simply doesn't want to give up. He gives in because he is *weary of you*, not because you have con-

vinced him. But he also *feels betrayed* by you and this is not really a basis for a trusting relationship.

4. *Withholding love*: of all the ways to exercise control in a marriage, withholding love may be the most powerful. We were created by God to give and receive love. When the person closest to us withdraws from us, the very basis of our existence is threatened and we do anything to connect again to the one we love. The dangerous aspect of withholding love is that your spouse may eventually *give up on you* and search for loving relationships elsewhere. Although this may not have to end up in an affair, the bond between you two has been severely weakened.

### 5.6.2 Submitting to Boundaries on our Control

If you truly love your spouse and want her or him to grow spiritually, you need to give up all attempts to control in favor of granting freedom and love and submit them to God (recall **Romans 6:12–14** and **1. John 1:8–9**). This may not be easy, because control strategies usually have turned into habits and are difficult to let go. Here are some steps for setting limits on your tendency to control.

1. *Realize the cost*: Control strategies may be successful for getting external compliance, but they may also result in losing your spouse's heart. Guilt, anger, assaults, and withholding love all negate your spouse's freedom and love for you. He may go along, but will often be resentful and emotionally absent – we just described that.

Your desire to set limits on your controlling tendencies will increase when you realize the high price you're paying for each little victory that your control strategies will give you.

2. *Ask your spouse how your control affects him*: Since empathy and love are the very core of marriage, you do not purposefully want to hurt the feelings of your spouse. But you may not realize how much pain you create by your controlling behavior. If you ask your spouse to let you know how your control affects him, you may for the first time see how hurtful and distant your attempts make him. A feeling of compassion for your spouse will make you able to set better limits on your desire to control him.

3. *Experience your own Helplessness to Change Your Spouse*: No matter how much you try, your spouse will not change his decisions, opinions, or feelings until he is ready to. You don't have any power over these (this is the *law of power* from Section 4.3) even if you would like to believe the opposite.

When you realize that all your attempts to control your spouse did not really change him, you will understand that your control mechanisms are totally useless.

Accepting this helplessness may be painful, but it helps you to see where the reality lies.

4. *Learn to Grieve:* Some people have difficulties accepting their helplessness, because they don't know how to deal with the resulting pain. *Grief helps you to accept the reality and let go of things you can't change or have.* When you allow yourself to grieve and to feel the loss and sadness about losing what you desire from your spouse, you will be ready to accept reality (**2. Corinthians 12:9–10**) and grant your spouse the freedom that you can't take away anyway.
5. *Work Through Dependency Issues:* Quite a few people know only one person through whom they get their needs met. If your spouse is that only person for you, you will have a tendency to control him.

If you wish a healthy and balanced relationship with your spouse you need to find additional sources of love, approval, truth, and forgiveness. Your spouse should, of course, be the prime source, but not the only one. Your need for recognition and approval can be met by friends and colleagues at work as well. Friends can be an additional source of love. When you have other people to get some of your needs met, you will be better able to give your spouse the freedom not to meet *all* of them.

I hope that this class can help us to build some of these friendships that we so desperately need. You may have noticed that the people in this class care for each other's problems and needs and I believe that each of us can find at least one new friend in here – if we only dare to let others get to know us.

6. *Be a Separate Person:* In some marriages one mate defines herself solely through her spouse instead of being her own individual soul. For such a person, every difference between herself and her spouse becomes a threat and she will try everything to eliminate such differences.

When you learn to define yourself by your own boundaries, you will realize that your spouse's feelings and decisions are *his*, not yours, and you will allow them to be different from your own feelings and choices.

7. *Value your Spouse's Freedom:* The basis for how spouses are to treat each other is Jesus' Golden Rule:

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (**Matthew 7:12**)

If you remember how you felt the last time someone attacked you for your choices, you will learn to appreciate freedom and grant the same freedom to your spouse as well.

8. *Set Boundaries Instead of Controlling:* Does giving up control mean you have to tolerate everything from your spouse? Of course not, because setting limits on someone and attempting to control him are very different things. Unfortunately, in some marriages, control strategies have become a substitute for establishing boundaries. You may find it difficult to say no to your spouse, because you are afraid of your partner's reaction, and resort to control strategies to avoid experiencing such differences.

When you learn to set appropriate limits with your spouse, you will feel safe and become able to give up controlling your partner.

Marriage, as we have seen, has much more to do with bringing ourselves under the control of God than with controlling our spouse. When we relinquish control, we are better able to love our spouse, protect our own freedom, and provide an environment for both of us to grow.