

Section 3: God's Good Safeguards For Marriage

Lesson 6: Marital Safeguards (Part One): Maintaining Relational Boundaries

Introduction

“Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set.” (Proverbs 22:28)

There was a young man named Hubris whose grandfather passed away shortly before he was born. Nevertheless, his grandfather, whose name was Sage, left his entire estate to him. Some years later, when the boy came of age, at last he inherited the large property which was bordered on every side by a tall fence with strong gates. Now the property itself was beautiful. It contained many ornate windows of fine craftsmanship, tall steeple-like spires on the east and west wings, and an entryway that seemed to be modeled after the grandeur of a king's court. However, as majestic as the artifice was, the fence which was lining the perimeter obstructed the view. When Hubris looked out the windows he could hardly see beyond the boundaries that his grandfather, Sage, had set on every side. Having only lived in the property for a few days, the young man quickly grew tired of this obstruction and determined that he would tear all the fences down. Although he did not say it out loud, in his heart he began to think that his grandfather was rather foolish for building these boundaries to begin with.

Given the size of the job at hand, Hubris sought to hire help for the task. The first man who came out to consider the job was named Cautious. He was a respected foreman at the Prudence Construction Company with many years of experience. After carefully looking over the work, he came to Hubris with a surprising reply: *“I don't recommend that you tear down this fence, sir. It seems to me that it was built for a reason. It was made to pro...”* Hubris interrupted Cautious mid-sentence and dismissed him abruptly. *“That is not the reply I wanted to hear,”* said Hubris. *“You have wasted my time. Good day!”* Timidly, Cautious tried once more to respectfully continue his explanation, but it was no use. Hubris was unwilling to listen. The next day Hubris invited another man to come out and examine the task. This man's name was Nearsighted, and he had a reputation all throughout the county for making speedy work of any sort of demolition job. After examining the fence for only a few moments he made an offer to young Hubris and the two agreed to a contract. By the end of the week the fence had been demolished, and the debris had been hauled away. As Hubris looked out the window that evening he smiled to himself and said in his heart, *“There, that is much better. What a foolish thing it was for my grandfather to have set up these hideous and restrictive boundaries all around this majestic property. Now everyone can see the glory of my inheritance.”*

That night, as Hubris slept in his bed quite contented with himself for his decisive work, others did indeed begin to see the glory of his inheritance. Hubris had not known that very near to his grandfather's property lived several notorious villains. Their names were Lust, Greed, Ambition, Theft, Grudge, Violence, Rivalry, and Conceit. These were a band of merciless fellows who would fall upon any vulnerable person that they could, whether young or old. All these years the thieves had been kept at bay by Sage's wisdom in building the strong and tall fence around the perimeter of his home. Never once had they made a breach beyond the two iron gates on the North and South which he called *Faith* and *Obedience*. But now, in Hubris' folly, the only thing that was standing between his inheritance and these villains had now been torn down. True to his reputation, Nearsighted had made quick work of demolishing the ancient boundaries set up by Hubris' grandfather. Thus, with nothing in their way to stop them, the villains crept in unhindered and unnoticed. They made their way through the courtyard, past the grand entrance, and into the very heart of the estate where Hubris slept. In the dark of the night, and without warning, they struck Hubris with such a deadly blow that not a sound was ever heard from him again.

Q: *What is this story about? What is it meant to communicate?*

The Importance of Boundaries

We must never be quick to think that we are wiser than those who have gone before us. The patterns of life which have been kept by our Christian ancestors, including the boundaries and safeguards they established, have all been set in place for a reason. This does not mean that our ancestors were always right, or that there is never a time for change. But it does mean that if we are going to break with the traditions handed down to us, we should only do so

when we have given very careful consideration as to why those traditions were established in the first place—that is, *what they were meant to promote and protect*.

In our modern times, we are very prone to have a high estimation of ourselves and to think that we have somehow grown beyond the wisdom of the centuries of old. For that reason, it is all the more important for us to hear afresh the voice of God pleading with us in the Scriptures saying:

“Thus says the LORD: Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

The very thing which this verse calls all believers to do, is the goal before us now. We want to consider “*the ancient paths*” of wisdom which will serve as safeguards to our marriages. We want to understand the boundaries and practices that God has prescribed in his Word for keeping out the numerous villains who are ever-ready to break in and wreak havoc upon our homes. Like Hubris, if we choose to tear down these boundaries of wisdom, it is likely that we will soon meet a similar fate to his own.

There are three particular marital safeguards which we will consider together:

- 1. Maintaining Healthy Relational Boundaries (This week)**
- 2. Maintaining Warm Friendship (Next week)**
- 3. Maintaining the Marriage Bed (Next week)**

1. Maintaining Healthy Relational Boundaries

A healthy, enduring, and God-honoring marriage is a marriage where boundaries are not only *established in theory*, but *diligently maintained in practice*. The boundaries that serve to protect a marriage are many in kind, and they cover a wide spectrum. However, I want to highlight one kind in particular: *Relational Boundaries*. That is, the proper boundaries which are to be maintained between ourselves and all other members of the opposite sex who are not our spouse.

The Need For Boundaries

One of the greatest areas of willful foolishness in married adults is a failure to maintain proper boundaries with members of the opposite sex. I say “*willful foolishness*” because we all know that it is not as if a switch gets flipped on the day of our wedding where our natural inclination toward the opposite sex suddenly goes away. For sentimental purposes we might like to pretend that this is the case, but we all know in our hearts that it is not. From the beginning, God designed men to find women attractive in body and in personality. Likewise, from the beginning, God designed women to find men attractive in the same ways. This is not a bad thing; It is a good thing; it is a valuable part of God’s wise and holy design. But just because something is *good*, does not mean that it is not also *dangerous* when handled carelessly. Think of fire as an example. Fire is a very good thing. It is used for heating our homes in winter, cooking our food, creating combustion in our engines, etc. But fire, though good, also has the propensity to destroy, doesn’t it? When fire is misused it can bring great devastations. The same is true of our God-given sexuality as men and women. Consider the words of Proverbs 6:27-28:

“Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?”

The point of these verses is that proper boundaries must be maintained in our lives or great damage will follow. The particular context of this warning is with respect to the attraction between men and women. “*Fire*” is good, but if you hold it “*next to [your] chest*” you are going to suffer severely. So what *should* you do? Is the answer to try to get rid of fire altogether? No, that is a fool’s errand. Fire is a part of life; it cannot be altogether avoided. What you must do is maintain a healthy boundary between yourself and fire so that it is never close enough to warm you to the point of wounding. The same is true with our attraction to the opposite sex.

There is nothing to be done about that fact that men and women find one another attractive. God designed us that way and it is not inherently sinful that we notice the desirable attributes that God has given to other people. The problem comes when we stop maintaining healthy boundaries toward those who are not our spouse. That is, when we fail to maintain proper boundaries with others *in the emotions of our hearts, in the thoughts of our minds, and in the actions of our lives.*

On your wedding day, as you took the vows of your devotion, you did not promise to never notice or appreciate the desirable God-given attributes of another person again. Why not? Because that is impossible. You were made to appreciate the unique expressions of God's glory in the members of the opposite sex. Nothing is going to change that. But what you did promise was to forevermore maintain a firm and clear boundary with all other people so that the exclusive intimacy of your heart, mind, and body would be singularly reserved for the spouse with whom you are united before God. You promised that the kind of love and intimacy that is only appropriate for marriage—including both physical and emotional intimacy—would never be offered to another person *“until death do you part.”*

Simply put, that solemn commitment requires *boundaries*. Just as violating proper boundaries with “fire” will most assuredly cause you to be “burned,” so violating proper boundaries with people who are not your spouse will cause you to deeply wound (if not ruin) your marriage. You simply cannot be a faithful husband or a faithful wife without maintaining healthy boundaries between yourself and members of the opposite sex. Many people have argued with this truth. They say it is too narrow and restricts their freedom. They say that the temptations described don't apply to them for *this reason* or *that*. They say that their situation is unique, etc. If that is the posture of your heart I would refer you back to the tone of Proverbs 6:27-28: *“Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?”* Those verses are not written as questions because the answer is unclear. They are written as questions because the self-evident absurdity of disagreeing with the obvious answer shows how utterly foolish it is to live in violation of these ancient and unchangeable principles.

So, If Boundaries Are Necessary, What Do They Look Like?

There are some boundaries which have *universal application to us all* irrespective of our situation. These include:

- *Never spending time alone with a member of the opposite sex who is not your spouse.*
- *Never putting yourself into situations where you and a person who is not your spouse are likely to develop intimate emotional bonds, (i.e. working relationships, sports teams, volunteering at church, social media, texting, etc.).*
- *Humbly recognizing when you feel even a tinge of attraction toward someone who is not your spouse and taking any necessary precautions from the very beginning so that the tiny spark of attraction is never fanned into a flame of sinful desire and sinful action.*

These basic boundaries are solid, time-tested wisdom handed down through the ages that will serve all of us well. However, they certainly are *not exhaustive*. In fact, it would be impossible for us to create an exhaustive list of boundaries that address the needs of every marriage. This is because the specific boundaries that are necessary will not be identical for every person. While we are all sinful in many ways, (and often in similar ways), we are not all sinful *in the exact same ways*. Moreover, we have different life situations that place us nearer to or further from various forms of danger. This means that the work of developing and maintaining boundaries is intensely personal, and must begin by honestly assessing our own hearts. As Proverbs 4:23 says, *“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it,”* (NIV). The words, *“above all else”* (NIV) or *“with all vigilance”* (ESV) make it clear that *“guarding the heart”* is of paramount importance if we desire to live a holy life. This is because what grips the heart shapes the life. This truth applies to the whole spectrum of life, but it is no less true with respect to our desire to have healthy, God-honoring marriages. If we do not *“guard our hearts”* by maintaining healthy boundaries, we will soon find that numerous and notorious villains will find their way into the attitudes and actions of our lives.

So what does it look like to *“guard your heart”*? We will spend the remainder of our time considering two important answers to this question. First of all, we will see that *guarding our heart means knowing our heart*, that is knowing our natural weaknesses and

proclivities. Second, we will see that *guarding our heart means safeguarding the portals to our heart*, that is maintaining healthy boundaries with respect to our minds, our eyes, our ears, physical touch, and our use of time.

1. Guarding Our Heart Means Knowing Our Heart

The first step in guarding our heart is to humbly endeavor to know ourselves well enough to recognize what kinds of situations that will present the greatest danger to us, (*i.e. where our weaknesses are*). Rose-colored glasses are not your friend in this work. Nor is this a time for protecting our self-esteem. This is an occasion where, while resting in the inexhaustible grace of God for all our guilt, we need to be gut-wrenchingly honest with ourselves about the remaining corruptions that continue to wage war in our hearts. We may not need to voice these things to others, but we need to be honest enough with God and with ourselves to admit what kinds of situations will present special dangers to us. Then, having identified where we are most vulnerable, we need to proceed by setting up *firm, immovable, and unapologetic* boundaries in those areas. By “*setting up boundaries*” I do not mean building flimsy fences that are easy to jump over right next to our temptations. I mean building tall, thick, and strong fences that sit far enough away from that particular temptation that, so long as we do not violate the boundary, the “*fire*” of its fury will never get close enough to our life for us to get “*burned*”.

To many people, particularly those who remain young in the faith, this will sound overly restrictive and extreme. But instead of entering into a long defense of the counsel given, let me simply quote the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. For it is his words, not mine, which present the strongest, clearest, and most extreme call for healthy boundary-building in all of Scripture:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell,” (Matthew 5:27-30).

There is simply no one who wants us to take the call to protect ourselves from situations in which we will be prone to sin more seriously than our Savior, Jesus Christ. Tall, thick, and strong boundaries that guard us from sin are not my idea, they are the wisdom given to us by the one we call our “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace,*” (*Isa. 9:6*). It is my great plea that we will take Jesus’ words seriously. But taking Jesus’ words seriously does not only mean *guarding our hearts by knowing our hearts*, it also means *safeguarding the portals to our hearts*. In fact, Jesus began to identify some of those portals in the passage quoted above when he spoke of our “*intent,*” (the mind), the “*eyes,*” and the “*hands*” (touch). He made particular mention of these things because they are among the most vulnerable points of access to the heart that we possess in our lives. Therefore, if we would be faithful to “*guard our hearts above all else*”, the portals to our hearts must be particularly safeguarded.

2. Guarding Our Heart Means Safeguarding the Portals To Our Heart

Before we consider each of the five most vulnerable portals to the heart, I want to briefly define what I mean by this expression. By portal to the heart I mean those parts of our body and life through which the heart is most easily influenced, either for better or for worse. That is, those things by which our desires are most deeply cultivated, shaped, and strengthened. Those portals include (1) *the thoughts of our minds*, (2) *the gaze of our eyes*, (3) *what we listen to through our ears*, (4) *what we touch with our hands*, and (5) *how we use our time*. Let us consider *why* and *how* to guard each of these portals for the sake of Christ’s honor and for the protection of our marriages and families.

1. The Thoughts of the Mind

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things,” (Philippians 4:8)

There is a vital connection between our *thought-life* and our *heart-life*. When we spend our time thinking about all the things we want but don’t have, how does this effect our heart? We become discontented, grumpy, jealous and covetous. The glimmer

of what is right in front of us fades and the appeal of having something else begins to rise. On the contrary, when we spend our time remembering that every blessing we enjoy is an undeserved gift of God's grace, our hearts tend to be grateful, cheerful, and contented. We may still recognize that things could be better, but we do so from a posture of sincere thanksgiving and appreciation toward the Lord for what we have. The difference between these two outcomes is not determined by our circumstances. It is determined by how we choose to *think* about our circumstances. Contentment is not found by a change of condition or situation, but by a change of mind that leads to a change of heart.

The same is true with respect to our thought life in marriage, and this is why the thoughts of the mind must be safeguarded. When we cease to have a heart of thanksgiving toward our spouse, (*i.e. recognizing their numerous positive qualities*), and instead begin to indulge in negative thoughts about them (*i.e. dwelling on their shortcomings*), we will most certainly grow more and more unappreciative toward them. If this pattern of thinking is allowed to persist unchecked in our thought-life, not only will this poison the joy and intimacy of our marital relationship, but it will also make us highly vulnerable to the illusion that *'the grass is greener'* somewhere else. It will make us much more inclined to think life with someone else might be better. Then, before you know it, those thoughts become desires, and those desires become longings, and those longings become actions, and suddenly our marriage and family is left in shambles because we did not safeguard this critical portal to our heart. Dear ones, we must not be so naive as to think that we can give free reign to our thought-life, whether by thinking negatively about our spouse or by thinking longingly about someone else who is not our spouse, and that this will have no consequence on our lives. The thoughts of the mind are a portal to our heart, and therefore, we must set firm boundaries around our thought-life in order to defend our marriages.

Q: *What makes the thoughts of the mind especially dangerous?* 1. _____ 2. _____

2. The Gaze Of Our Eyes

"Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you," (Proverbs 4:25).

What happens to your mouth and stomach when you stare at a tasty meal? Saliva begins to form and your stomach starts to grumble. Why? Because the gaze of our eyes and the desires of our body are inseparably connected. But this is not only true of the body, it is also true of the heart. What happens to your perception of your current automobile when you go walking around a lot full of shiny new cars? Suddenly, your appreciation for the car you have tends to diminish. Why? Because what we behold we desire. It is that simple. This is why we must guard our eyes from lingering where they ought not to linger.

This means that neither men nor women should let their gaze linger upon the attractions of the opposite sex. It is not wrong to notice the beauty of a woman or the handsomeness of a man. But it is wrong to begin to look upon their attractive form with lustful desire. A stolen glance fueled by lust, even if unnoticed by the other person (or welcomed by the other person), is not an innocent action. Nor is it an action without consequence. Even the lustful gaze itself is a sin against the Lord, against that person, and against your spouse. Moreover, it is a breach of proper boundaries which has just invited sin's influence to take a deeper hold upon your heart. How can I say all this? Because Jesus himself said it: *"I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart," (Matthew 5:28).* The activity of the eyes is a portal to the heart, therefore the gaze of our eyes must be safeguarded at all times. There is a proper place for us to fix our eyes as a spouse, and that is upon the beauty of the husband or wife that God has given to us, (Prov. 5:15-20).

Q: *Where did King David's fall into adultery begin?*

Q: *What are the areas where we need to especially guard our eyes?*

3. What We Listen To Through Our Ears

“For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword,” (Proverbs 5:3-4).

Even the strongest person among us is deeply susceptible to the flattery of the tongue. When another person who is not our spouse speaks *words of affirmation*, *words of recognition*, *words of attraction*, or *words of deep compassion* into our ears, they can quickly win influence over our hearts. This is especially true when words like these have ceased to pass between a husband and wife within their own home. The heart longs for verbal expressions of love. Thus, when a husband and wife fail to frequently express *affirmation* (“*I am so thankful for you!*”), *recognition* (“*You are so good at that!*”), *attraction* (“*You look so beautiful to me!*”), and *compassion* (“*I can’t describe how deeply I care for you!*”), the heart of their spouse is made more vulnerable to the allure of the words of others.

Therefore, whenever you find your heart begin to jump at the words of another person of the opposite sex who is not your spouse, you need to take heed and be on guard. Like Joseph before Potiphar’s wife, you need to remove yourself from that situation with haste—even if the result is personal embarrassment or loss, (*Gen. 39:12*). No matter how strong your defenses may feel at the start, your resolve will be like a block of ice that has been set before the sun. Your fleshly defenses cannot endure that environment indefinitely, but will slowly melt away until your heart is left more and more vulnerable to the flattering appeal of the words being spoken. Therefore, place a safeguard over your ears, for they too are a portal to the heart.

Q: *What is an “emotional affair”? Is it a real thing? Is it a real violation of our marriage covenant?*

4. What We Touch With Our Hands

“His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me! I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases,” (Song of Solomon 2:6-7).

It is no secret that physical touch is something that must be carefully safeguarded in all sorts of relationships—especially in relationships with members of the opposite sex. Wherever attraction is aroused, even in the faintest degree, physical touch of any kind becomes very powerful—even intoxicating. It stirs the passions vigorously, and ignites a deep sense of intrigue. Moreover, once the barrier of touch is broken, the desire for more frequency and an increasing depth of intimacy in that touch almost always follows. This kind of passionate physical intimacy is completely appropriate between a husband and wife. But it must not be “*stirred up*” or “*awoken*” outside of that sacred context. This means that we must draw firm and hard boundaries with others regarding touch. Engaging in any form of inappropriate physical touch with someone who is not your spouse—including forms of touch that appear innocent but are being done for flirtatious reasons—is like pouring gasoline around the perimeter of your home and then shooting sparks at it. No one who engages in such behavior should pretend to be surprised when their marriage is left in ashes.

The teaching of God’s Word gives us a perfect balance with respect to the appropriate use of physical touch. It gives us the strongest encouragement to enjoy the sexual embrace of our spouse: “*Let [your wife’s] breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love,*” (*Prov. 5:19; read also v15-23*). But the Scriptures also give us the strongest warnings to guard ourselves from ever violating boundaries of touch with anyone who is not our spouse: “*...no one who touches her*”—that is, engages in inappropriate contact with a person who is not their spouse—“*will go unpunished,* (*Prov. 6:29; read also Prov. 7*).

Q: *Where does dangerous and inappropriate physical touch with someone other than a person’s spouse often begin?*

5. How We Use Our Time

“The mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth...” (Job 14:18-19).

Who would ever think that something so pliable as “water” could “wear away the stones” and “wash away the soil” of the mighty “mountains”? Yet, given enough *time*, even a trickling stream will leave its lasting mark and carve its way through “the rock.” Thus, it is not only the power and impact of an impassioned moment which we must wisely guard our hearts against. It is also the subtle trickle of 1,000 small, and seemingly inconsequential moments that can leave a lasting impact upon our hearts.

The final portal to the heart that we must carefully safeguard is *our use of time*. This is the most unsuspecting portal of them all, but it is no less dangerous to our marriages if left without proper boundaries. When we spend a considerable amount of time in close connection with another person, a certain level of deepened relational intimacy forms. This can happen in any setting, but let’s use work life as an example.

As you work alongside another person of the opposite sex, you will often need to collaborate, support each other’s projects, and depend on one another’s gifts. Moreover, you will also face some of the same difficulties and hardships, leading you to both sympathize and celebrate together as you overcome them. None of these things are inherently bad or ill-intended; they are simply part of work life. But over time, they have the propensity to subtly become a succession of shared experiences through which a significant level of bonding takes place. Add to this mix that the typical employee not only spends their *best* and *most alert hours* with their coworkers, but also, in many cases, they spend *more waking hours* with their coworkers. Thus, without boundaries, over the course of months and years it may end up that they have spent more time bonding with their coworker than with their spouse. The result is that one relationship has been continually strengthened while the other has been continually weakened. And what was the main ingredient in this recipe for disaster? *A failure to properly safeguard our use of time*. Like water upon a rock, *time* can be a very subtle means by which the heart is deeply influenced. Therefore, like all of the other portals mentioned, our use of time must also be carefully protected in the defense of our marriages and families.

Conclusion

As we noted at the opening of this portion of our study, we must never be quick to think that we are wiser than those who have gone before us. The patterns of life which have been kept by our Christian ancestors, including the boundaries and safeguards they established, have all been set in place for a reason. Therefore, let us humbly heed the protective wisdom of the Word of God which says,

“Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set,” (Proverbs 22:28).