

## **BOUNDARIES**

### **Supplemental Notes #2**

#### **“Ten Laws of Boundaries”**

People raised in dysfunctional families, or families where God’s ways of boundaries are not practiced, have experiences similar to that of the alien. They find themselves transported into adult life where spiritual principles that have never been explained to them govern their relationships and well-being.

God’s world is set up with laws and principles. Spiritual realities are as real as gravity, and if you do not know them, you will discover their effects. Just because we have not been taught these principles of life and relationships does not mean they will not rule.

#### **Law #1: The Law of Sowing and Reaping**

The law of cause and effect is a basic law of life.

When God tells us that we will reap what we sow, he is not punishing us; he’s telling us how things really are. Sometimes, however, people don’t reap what they sow, because someone else steps in and reaps the consequences for them. If every time you overspent, your mother sent you money to cover check overdrafts or high credit-card balances, you wouldn’t reap the consequences of your spendthrift ways. Your mother would be protecting you from the natural consequences: the hounding of creditors or going hungry. As the mother in the above example demonstrates, the Law of Sowing and Reaping can be interrupted. And it is often people who have no boundaries who do the interrupting.

Just as we can interfere with the law of gravity by catching a glass tumbling off the table, people can interfere with the Law of Cause and Effect by stepping in and rescuing irresponsible people. Rescuing a person from the natural consequences of his behavior enables him to continue in irresponsible behavior. The Law of Sowing and Reaping has not been repealed. It is still operating. But the doer is not suffering the consequences; someone else is. Today we call a person who continually rescues another person a codependent. In effect, codependent, boundaryless people “co-sign the note” of life for the irresponsible person. Then they end up paying the bills—

Establishing boundaries helps codependent people stop interrupting the Law of Sowing and Reaping in their loved one’s life. Boundaries force the person who is doing the sowing to also do the reaping. It doesn’t help just to confront the irresponsible person.

Jack will not feel the need to change because his behavior is not causing him any pain. Confronting an irresponsible person is not painful to him; only consequences are.

People caught in destructive patterns are usually not wise. They need to suffer consequences before they change their behavior. The Bible tells us it is worthless to confront foolish people: “Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you” (Prov. 9:8). Codependent people bring insults and pain onto themselves when they confront irresponsible people. In reality, they just need to stop interrupting the law of sowing and reaping in someone’s life.

#### **Law #2: The Law of Responsibility**

Many times when people hear a talk on boundaries and taking responsibility for their own lives, they say, “That’s so self-centered. We should love one another and deny ourselves.” Or, they actually become selfish and self-centered. Or, they feel “guilty” when they do someone a favor. These are unbiblical views of responsibility. The Law of Responsibility includes loving others. The commandment to love is the entire law for Christians (Gal. 5:13–14). Jesus calls it “my” commandment, “Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Anytime you are not loving others, you are not taking full responsibility for yourself; you have disowned your heart. Problems arise when boundaries of responsibility are confused. We are to love one another, not be one another. I can’t feel your feelings for you. I can’t think for you. I can’t behave for you. I can’t work through the disappointment that limits bring for you. In short, I can’t grow for you; only you can. Likewise, you can’t grow for me.

You are responsible for yourself. I am responsible for myself. An additional theme in the Bible says that we are to treat others the way we would want to be treated. If we were down and out, helpless and without hope, we would certainly want help and provision. This is a very important side of being responsible “to.” Another aspect of being responsible “to” is not only in the giving but in the setting of limits on another’s destructive and irresponsible behavior. It is not good to rescue someone from the consequences of their sin, for you will only have to do it again. You have reinforced the pattern (Prov. 19:19).

A strong strand throughout the Bible stresses that you are to give to needs and put limits on sin. Boundaries help you do just that.

### **Law #3: The Law of Power**

The Twelve Steps and the Bible teach that people must admit that they are moral failures. Alcoholics admit that they are powerless over alcohol; they don’t have the fruit of self-control. They are powerless over their addiction, much like Paul was: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . 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 . . . waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (Rom. 7:15, 19, 23). This is powerlessness. John says that we are all in that state, and that anyone that denies it is lying (1 John 1:8). Though you do not have the power in and of yourself

to overcome these patterns, you do have the power to do some things that will bring fruits of victory later:

1. You have the power to agree with the truth about your problems. In the Bible this is called “confession.” To confess means to “agree with.” You have the ability to at least say “that is me.” You may not be able to change it yet, but you can confess.
2. You have the power to submit your inability to God. You always have the power to ask for help and yield. You have the power to humble yourself and turn your life over to him. You may not be able to make yourself well, but you can call the Doctor! The humbling of yourself commanded in the Bible is always coupled with great promises.
3. You have the power to search and ask God and others to reveal more and more about what is within your boundaries.
4. You have the power to turn from the evil that you find within you. This is called repentance.
5. You have the power to humble yourself and ask God and others to help you with your developmental injuries and leftover childhood needs.
6. You have the power to seek out those that you have injured and make amends.

On the other side of the coin, your boundaries help define what you do not have power over: everything outside of them! Listen to the way the serenity prayer (probably the best boundary prayer ever written) says it best:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

In other words, God, clarify my boundaries! You can work on submitting yourself to the process and working with God to change you. You cannot change anything else: not the weather, the past, the economy—and especially not other people. You cannot change others. More people suffer from trying to change others than from any other sickness. And it is impossible. What you can do is influence others. But there is a trick. Since you cannot get them to change, you must change yourself so that their destructive patterns no longer work on you.

In doing so, they may be motivated to change if their old ways no longer work. Another dynamic that happens when you let go of others is that you begin to get healthy, and they may notice and envy your health. They may want some of what you have.

#### **Law #4: The Law of Respect**

One word comes up again and again when people describe their problems with boundaries: they. “But they won’t accept me if I say no.” “But they will get angry if I set limits.” “But they won’t speak to me for a week if I tell them how I really feel.” We fear that others will not respect our boundaries. We focus on others and lose clarity about ourselves. Sometimes the problem is that we judge others’ boundaries. We say or think things such as this:

“How could he refuse to come by and pick me up?

“That’s so selfish of her to not come to the luncheon. After all, the rest of us are sacrificing.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’? I just need the money for a little while.” “It seems that, after all I do for you, you could at least do me this one little favor.”

We judge the boundary decisions of others, thinking that we know best how they “ought” to give, and usually that means “they ought to give to me the way I want them to!” But the Bible says whenever we judge, we will be judged (Matt. 7:1–2). When we judge others’ boundaries, ours will fall under the same judgment. If we condemn others’ boundaries, we expect them to condemn ours.

This is where the Law of Respect comes in. As Jesus said, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12)

We need to respect the boundaries of others. We need to love the boundaries of others in order to command respect for our own. We need to treat their boundaries the way we want them to treat ours. If we love and respect people who tell us no, they will love and respect our no. Freedom begets freedom.

When we accept others’ freedom, we feel better about our own.

#### **Law #5: The Law of Motivation**

Stan was confused. He read in the Bible and was taught in church that it was more blessed to give than to receive, but he found that this often was not true. He frequently felt unappreciated for “all he was doing.” He wished people would have more consideration for his time and energy. Yet, whenever someone wanted something from him, he would do it. He thought this was loving, and he wanted to be a loving person. Finally, when the fatigue grew into depression, he came to see me. When I asked what was wrong, Stan replied that he was “loving too much.” “How can you ‘love too much?’ ” I asked. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.” “Oh, it’s very simple,” replied Stan. “I do far more for people than I should. And that makes me very depressed.” “I’m not quite sure what you are doing,” I said, “but it certainly isn’t love. The Bible says that true love leads to a blessed state and a state of cheer. Love brings

happiness, not depression. If your loving is depressing you, it's probably not love." "I don't see how you can say that. I do so much for everyone. I give and give and give. How can you say that I'm not loving?" "I can say that because of the fruit of your actions. You should be feeling happy, not depressed.

As we spent more time together, Stan learned that a lot of his "doing" and sacrificing was not motivated by love but by fear. Stan had learned early in life that if he did not do what his mother wanted, she would withdraw love from him. As a result, Stan learned to give reluctantly. His motive for giving was not love, but fear of losing love. Stan was also afraid of other people's anger. Because his father frequently yelled at him, Stan said yes out of fear that he would lose love and that other people would get angry at him. These false motives and others keep us from setting boundaries:

1. Fear of loss of love, or abandonment. People who say yes and then resent saying yes fear losing someone's love. This is the dominant motive of martyrs. They give to get love, and when they don't get it, they feel abandoned.
2. Fear of others' anger.
2. Fear of loneliness. Some people give in to others because they feel that that will "win" love and end their loneliness.
4. Fear of losing the "good me" inside. We are made to love. As a result, when we are not loving, we are in pain. Many people cannot say, "I love you and I do not want to do that." Such a statement does not make sense to them. They think that to love means to always say yes.
5. Guilt. Many people's giving is motivated by guilt. They are trying to do enough good things to overcome the guilt inside and feel good about themselves. When they say no, they feel bad. So they keep trying to earn a sense of goodness.
3. Payback. Many people have received things with guilt messages attached. For example, their parents say things like, "I never had it as good as you." "You should be ashamed at all you get." They feel a burden to pay for all they have been given.
4. Approval. Many feel as if they are still children seeking parental approval. Therefore, when someone wants something from them, they need to give so that this symbolic parent will be "well pleased."
8. Overidentification with the other's loss. Many times people have not dealt with all their own disappointments and losses, so whenever they deprive someone else with a no, they "feel" the other person's sadness to the nth degree. They can't stand to hurt someone that badly, so they comply.

If your giving is not leading to cheer, then you need to examine the Law of Motivation. The Law of Motivation says this: Freedom first, service second. If you serve to get free of your fear, you are doomed to failure. Let God work on the fears, resolve them, and create some healthy boundaries to guard the freedom you were called to.

#### **Law #6: The Law of Evaluation**

Things can hurt and not harm us. In fact they can even be good for us. And things that feel good can be very harmful to us." You need to evaluate the effects of setting boundaries and be responsible to the other person, but that does not mean you should avoid setting boundaries because someone responds with hurt or anger.

Deciding to set boundaries is difficult because it requires decision making and confrontation, which, in turn, may cause pain to someone you love. We cause pain by making choices that others do not like, but we also cause pain by confronting people when they are wrong. But if we do not share our anger with another, bitterness and hatred can set in. We need to be honest with one another about how we are hurt. "Speak truthfully to [your] neighbor, for [you] are all members of one body" (Eph. 4.25).

As iron sharpens iron, we need confrontation and truth from others to grow. No one likes to hear negative things about him or herself. But in the long run it may be good for us.

#### **Law #7: The Law of Proactivity**

Many of us have known people who, after years of being passive and compliant, suddenly go ballistic, and we wonder what happened.

In reality, they had been complying for years, and their pent-up rage explodes. This reactive phase of boundary creation is helpful, especially for victims. They need to get out of the powerless, victimized place in which they may have been forced by physical and sexual abuse, or by emotional blackmail and manipulation. We should herald their emancipation.

But when is enough enough? Reaction phases are necessary but not sufficient for the establishment of boundaries. Emotionally, the reactive stance brings diminishing returns. You must react to find your own boundaries, but having found them, you must “not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature. If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other”

Eventually, you must rejoin the human race you have reacted to, and establish connections as equals, loving your neighbor as yourself. This is the beginning of the establishment of proactive, instead of reactive, boundaries.

Proactive people show you what they love, what they want, what they purpose, and what they stand for. These people are very different from those who are known by what they hate, what they don't like, what they stand against, and what they will not do.

Listen to Jesus compare the reactive person who is still controlled by the law and others with the free person: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:38–39). Do not try to get to freedom without owning your reactive period and feelings.

#### **Law #8: The Law of Envy**

The New Testament speaks strongly against the envious heart. Consider James: “You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight” (James 4:2).

What does envy have to do with boundaries? Envy is probably the basest emotion we have. A direct result of the Fall, it was Satan's sin.

Envy defines “good” as “what I do not possess,” and hates the good that it has. How many times have you heard someone subtly put down the accomplishments of others, somehow robbing them of the goodness they had attained?

We all have envious parts to our personalities. But what is so destructive about this particular sin is that it guarantees that we will not get what we want and keeps us perpetually insatiable and dissatisfied. This is not to say that it is wrong to want things we do not have. God has said that he will give us the desires of our heart. The problem with envy is that it focuses outside our boundaries, onto others. If we are focusing on what others have or have accomplished, we are neglecting our responsibilities and will ultimately have an empty heart. Look at the difference in Galatians 6:4: “Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.”

Envy is a self-perpetuating cycle. Boundaryless people feel empty and unfulfilled. They look at another's sense of fullness and feel envious. This time and energy needs to be spent on taking responsibility for their lack and doing something about it. Taking action is the only way out.

A lonely person stays isolated and envious of the close relationships others have. A single woman withdraws from social life, envying the marriages and families of her friends.

A person chooses the righteous life, but envies and resents those who seem to be “having all the fun.” These people are all negating their own actions (Gal. 6:4) and comparing themselves to others, staying stuck and resentful.

Notice the difference between those statements and these:

A lonely person owns his lack of relationships and asks himself and God, “I wonder why I always withdraw from people. I can at least go and talk to a counselor about this.”

These people are questioning themselves instead of envying others. Your envy should always be a sign to you that you are lacking something. At that moment, you should ask God to help you understand what you resent, why you do not have whatever you are envying, and whether you truly desire it. Ask him to show you what you need to do to get there, or to give up the desire.

### **Law #9: The Law of Activity**

Human beings are responders and initiators.

Many times we have boundary problems because we lack initiative—the God-given ability to propel ourselves into life. Consider the contrast in the parable of the talents. The ones who succeeded were active and assertive. They initiated and pushed. The one who lost out was passive and inactive. The sad thing is that many people who are passive are not inherently evil or bad people. But evil is an active force, and passivity can become an ally of evil by not pushing against it. Passivity never pays off. God will match our effort, but he will never do our work for us. That would be an invasion of our boundaries. He wants us to be assertive and active, seeking and knocking on the door of life.

God will not enable passivity. The “wicked and lazy” servant was passive. He did not try. God’s grace covers failure, but it cannot make up for passivity. We have to do our part. The sin God rebukes is not trying and failing, but failing to try. Trying, failing, and trying again is called learning.

God expresses his opinion toward passivity in Hebrews 10:38–39: “‘But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.” Passive “shrinking back” is intolerable to God, and when we understand how destructive it is to the soul, we can see why God does not tolerate it. God wants us to “preserve our souls.” That is the role of boundaries; they define and preserve our property, our soul.

I have been told that when a baby bird is ready to hatch, if you break the egg for the bird, it will die. The bird must peck its own way out of the egg into the world.

This is also the way God has made us. If he “hatches” us, does our work for us, invades our boundaries, we will die. We must not shrink back passively. Our boundaries can only be created by our being active and aggressive, by our knocking, seeking, and asking (Matt. 7:7–8).

### **Law #10: The Law of Exposure**

A boundary is a property line. It defines where you begin and end. We have been discussing why you need such a line. One reason stands above all the others: You do not exist in a vacuum. You exist in relation to God and others. Your boundaries define you in relation to others.

The whole concept of boundaries has to do with the fact that we exist in relationship. Therefore, boundaries are really about relationship, and finally about love. That’s why the Law of Exposure is so important. The Law of

Exposure says that your boundaries need to be made visible to others and communicated to them in relationship. We have many boundary problems because of relational fears. We are beset by fears of guilt, not being liked, loss of love, loss of connection, loss of approval, receiving anger, being known, and so on. These are all failures in love, and God's plan is that we learn how to love. These relational problems can only be solved in relationships, for that is the context of the problems themselves, and the context of spiritual existence.

Because of these fears, we try to have secret boundaries. We withdraw passively and quietly, instead of communicating an honest no to someone we love. We secretly resent instead of telling someone that we are angry about how they have hurt us. Often, we will privately endure the pain of someone's irresponsibility instead of telling them how their behavior affects us and other loved ones, information that would be helpful to their soul. In other situations, a partner will secretly comply with her spouse, not offering her feelings or opinions for twenty years, and then suddenly "express" her boundaries by filing for divorce. Or parents will "love" their children by giving in over and over for years, not setting limits, and resenting the love they are showing. The children grow up never feeling loved, because of the lack of honesty, and their parents are befuddled, thinking, "After all we've done."

In these instances, because of unexpressed boundaries, the relationships suffered. An important thing to remember about boundaries is that they exist, and they will affect us, whether or not we communicate them. In the same way that the alien suffered from not knowing the laws of Earth, we suffer when we do not communicate the reality of our boundaries. If our boundaries are not communicated and exposed directly, they will be communicated indirectly or through manipulation. The Bible speaks to this issue in many places. Listen to the words of Paul: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Eph. 4:25–26). The biblical mandate is be honest and be in the light.

The Bible continually speaks of our being in the light and of the light as the only place where we have access to God and others. But, because of our fears, we hide aspects of ourselves in the darkness, where the devil has an opportunity. When our boundaries are in the light, that is, are communicated openly, our personalities begin to integrate for the first time. They become "visible," in Paul's words, and then they become light. They are transformed and changed. Healing always takes place in the light.

Real relationship means that I am in the light with my boundaries and other aspects of myself that are difficult to communicate. Our boundaries are affected by sin; they "miss the mark," and need to be brought into the light for God to heal them and others to benefit from them. This is the path to real love: Communicate your boundaries openly

God rescued his people from the Egyptians, but, he taught them his principles and ways. These proved to be life to them. But, they had to learn them, practice them, and fight many battles to internalize these principles of faith. God has probably led you out of captivity also. Whether it was from a dysfunctional family, the world, your own religious self-righteousness, or the scatteredness of being lost, he has been your Redeemer. But what he has secured needs to be possessed. The land to which he has brought you has certain realities and principles. Learn these as set forth in his Word, and you'll find his kingdom a wonderful place to live.