
Chapter 2

What Does a Boundary Look Like?

The parents of a twenty-five-year-old man came to see me with a common request: they wanted me to “fix” their son, Bill. When I asked where Bill was, they answered, “Oh, he didn’t want to come.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, he doesn’t think he has a problem,” they replied.

“Maybe he’s right,” I said, to their surprise. “Tell me about it.”

They recited a history of problems that had begun at a very young age. Bill had never been “quite up to snuff” in their eyes. In recent years he had exhibited problems with drugs and an inability to stay in school and find a career.

It was apparent that they loved their son very much and were heartbroken over the way he was living. They had tried everything they knew to get him to change and live a responsible life, but all had failed. He was still using drugs, avoiding responsibility, and keeping questionable company.

They told me that they had always given him everything he needed. He had plenty of money at school so “he wouldn’t have to work and he would have plenty of time for study and a social life.” When he flunked out of one school, or stopped going to classes, they

were more than happy to do everything they could to get him into another school, "where it might be better for him."

After they had talked for a while, I responded: "I think your son is right. He doesn't have a problem."

You could have mistaken their expression for a snapshot; they stared at me in disbelief for a full minute. Finally the father said, "Did I hear you right? You don't think he has a problem?"

"That's correct," I said. "He doesn't have a problem. You do. He can do pretty much whatever he wants, no problem. You pay, you fret, you worry, you plan, you exert energy to keep him going. He doesn't have a problem because you have taken it from him. Those things *should* be his problem, but as it now stands, they are yours. *Would you like for me to help you help him to have some problems?*"

They looked at me like I was crazy, but some lights were beginning to go on in their heads. "What do you mean, 'help him to have some problems'?" his mother asked.

"Well," I explained, "I think that the solution to this problem would be to clarify some boundaries so that his actions cause *him* problems and not you."

"What do you mean, 'boundaries'?" the father asked.

"Look at it this way. It is as if he's your neighbor, who never waters his lawn. But, whenever you turn on your sprinkler system, the water falls on his lawn. Your grass is turning brown and dying, but Bill looks down at his green grass and thinks to himself, 'My yard is doing fine.' That is how your son's life is. He doesn't study, or plan, or work, yet he has a nice place to live, plenty of money, and all the rights of a family member who is doing his part.

"If you would define the property lines a little better, if you would fix the sprinkler system so that the water would fall on your lawn, and if he didn't water his own lawn, he would have to live in dirt. He might not like that after a while.

"As it stands now, he is *irresponsible and happy*, and you are *responsible and miserable*. A little boundary clarification would do the trick. You need some fences to keep his problems out of your yard and in his, where they belong."

“Isn’t that a bit cruel, just to stop helping like that?” the father asked.

“Has helping him helped?” I asked.

His look told me that he was beginning to understand.

Invisible Property Lines and Responsibility

In the physical world, boundaries are easy to see. Fences, signs, walls, moats with alligators, manicured lawns, or hedges are all physical boundaries. In their differing appearances, they give the same message: **THIS IS WHERE MY PROPERTY BEGINS**. The owner of the property is legally responsible for what happens on his or her property. Non-owners are not responsible for the property.

Physical boundaries mark a visible property line that *someone holds the deed to*. You can go to the county courthouse and find out exactly where those boundaries of responsibility are and whom to call if you have business there.

In the spiritual world, boundaries are just as real, but often harder to see. The goal of this chapter is to help you define your intangible boundaries and to recognize them as an everpresent reality that can increase your love and save your life. In reality, these boundaries define your soul, and they help you to guard it and maintain it (Prov. 4:23).

Me and Not Me

Boundaries define us. They define *what is me* and *what is not me*. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership.

Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom. If I know where my yard begins and ends, I am free to do with it what I like. Taking responsibility for my life opens up many different options. However, if I do not “own” my life, my choices and options become very limited.

Think how confusing it would be if someone told you to “guard this property diligently, because I will hold you responsible for what

happens here,” and then did not tell you the boundaries of the property. Or they did not give you the means with which to protect the property? This would be not only confusing but also potentially dangerous.

This is exactly what happens to us emotionally and spiritually, however. God designed a world where we all live “within” ourselves; that is, we inhabit our own souls, and we are responsible for the things that make up “us.” “The heart knows its own bitterness, and no one shares its joy” (Prov. 14:10). We have to deal with what is in our soul, and boundaries help us to define what that is. If we are not shown the parameters, or are taught wrong parameters, we are in for much pain.

The Bible tells us clearly what our parameters are and how to protect them, but often our family, or other past relationships, confuses us about our parameters.

In addition to showing us what we are responsible for, boundaries help us to define what is *not* on our property and what we are *not* responsible for. We are not, for example, responsible for other people. Nowhere are we commanded to have “other-control,” although we spend a lot of time and energy trying to get it!

To and For

We are responsible *to* others and *for* ourselves. “Carry each other’s burdens,” says Galatians 6:2, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” This verse shows our responsibility *to* one another.

Many times others have “burdens” that are too big to bear. They do not have enough strength, resources, or knowledge to carry the load, and they need help. Denying ourselves to do for others what they *cannot* do for themselves is showing the sacrificial love of Christ. This is what Christ did for us. He did what we could not do for ourselves; he saved us. This is being responsible “to.”

On the other hand, verse 5 says that “each one should carry his own load.” Everyone has responsibilities that only he or she can carry. These things are our own particular “load” that we need to take daily responsibility for and work out. No one can do certain

things *for* us. We have to take ownership of certain aspects of life that are our own “load.”

The Greek words for *burden* and *load* give us insight into the meaning of these texts. The Greek word for *burden* means “excess burdens,” or burdens that are so heavy that they weigh us down. These burdens are like boulders. They can crush us. We shouldn’t be expected to carry a boulder by ourselves! It would break our backs. We need help with the boulders—those times of crisis and tragedy in our lives.

In contrast, the Greek word for *load* means “cargo,” or “the burden of daily toil.” This word describes the everyday things we all need to do. These loads are like knapsacks. Knapsacks are possible to carry. We are expected to carry our own. We are expected to deal with our own feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as the responsibilities God has given to each one of us, even though it takes effort.

Problems arise when people act as if their “boulders” are daily loads, and refuse help, or as if their “daily loads” are boulders they shouldn’t have to carry. The results of these two instances are either perpetual pain or irresponsibility.

Lest we stay in pain or become irresponsible, it is very important to determine what “me” is, where my boundary of responsibility is and where someone else’s begins. We will define what we are responsible for later in this chapter. For now let’s look more closely at the nature of boundaries.

Good In, Bad Out

Boundaries help us to distinguish our property so that we can take care of it. They help us to “guard our heart with all diligence.” We need to keep things that will nurture us inside our fences and keep things that will harm us outside. In short, *boundaries help us keep the good in and the bad out*. They guard our treasures (Matt. 7:6) so that people will not steal them. They keep the pearls inside, and the pigs outside.

God and Boundaries

The concept of boundaries comes from the very nature of God. God defines himself as a distinct, separate being, and he is responsible for himself. He defines and takes responsibility for his personality by telling us what he thinks, feels, plans, allows, will not allow, likes, and dislikes.

He also defines himself as separate from his creation and from us. He differentiates himself from others. He tells us who he is and who he is not. For example, he says that he is love and that he is not darkness (1 John 4:16; 1:6).

In addition, he has boundaries within the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one, but at the same time they are distinct persons with their own boundaries. Each one has his own personhood and responsibilities, as well as a connection and love for one another (John 17:24).

God also limits what he will allow in his yard. He confronts sin and allows consequences for behavior. He guards his house and will not allow evil things to go on there. He invites people in who will love him, and he lets his love flow outward to them at the same time. The “gates” of his boundaries open and close appropriately.

In the same way he gave us his “likeness” (Gen. 1:26), he gave us personal responsibility within limits. He wants us to “rule and subdue” the earth and to be responsible stewards over the life he has given us. To do that, we need to develop boundaries like God’s.

Examples of Boundaries

Boundaries are anything that helps to differentiate you from someone else, or shows where you begin and end. Here are some examples of boundaries.

Skin

The most basic boundary that defines you is your physical skin. People often use this boundary as a metaphor for saying that their personal boundaries have been violated: “He really gets under my

skin.” Your physical self is the first way that you learn that you are separate from others. As an infant, you slowly learn that you are different from the mother or father who cuddles you.

The skin boundary keeps the good in and the bad out. It protects your blood and bones, holding them on the inside and all together. It also keeps germs outside, protecting you from infection. At the same time skin has openings that let the “good” in, like food, and the “bad” out, like waste products.

Victims of physical and sexual abuse often have a poor sense of boundaries. Early in life they were taught that their property did not really begin at their skin. Others could invade their property and do whatever they wanted. As a result, they have difficulty establishing boundaries later in life.

Words

In the physical world a fence or some other kind of structure usually delineates a boundary. In the spiritual world, fences are invisible. Nevertheless, you can create good protective fences with your words.

The most basic boundary-setting word is *no*. It lets others know that you exist apart from them and that you are in control of you. Being clear about your *no*—and your *yes*—is a theme that runs throughout the Bible (Matt. 5:37; James 5:12).

No is a confrontational word. The Bible says that we are to confront people we love, saying, “No, that behavior is not okay. I will not participate in that.” The word *no* is also important in setting limits on abuse. Many passages of Scripture urge us to say no to others’ sinful treatment of us (Matt. 18:15–20).

The Bible also warns us against giving to others “reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Cor. 9:7). People with poor boundaries struggle with saying no to the control, pressure, demands, and sometimes the real needs of others. They feel that if they say no to someone, they will endanger their relationship with that person, so they passively comply but inwardly resent. Sometimes a person is pressuring you to do something; other times the pressure comes from your own sense of what you “should” do. If you cannot say no to this external

or internal pressure, you have lost control of your property and are not enjoying the fruit of “self-control.”

Your words also define your property for others as you communicate your feelings, intentions, or dislikes. It is difficult for people to know where you stand when you do not use words to define your property. God does this when he says, “I like this and I hate that.” Or, “I will do this, and I will not do that.” Your words let people know where you stand and thus give them a sense of the “edges” that help identify you. “I don’t like it when you yell at me!” gives people a clear message about how you conduct relationships and lets them know the “rules” of your yard.

Truth

Knowing the truth about God and his property puts limits on you and shows you his boundaries. Realizing the truth of his unchangeable reality helps you to define yourself in relation to him. When he says that you will reap what you sow (Gal. 6:7), for example, you either define yourself in relation to that reality, or continue to get injured if you try to go against it. To be in touch with God’s truth is to be in touch with reality, and to live in accord with that reality makes for a better life (Ps. 119:2, 45).

Satan is the great distorter of reality. Recall in the garden when he tempted Eve to question God’s boundaries and his truth. The consequences were disastrous.

There is always safety in the truth, whether it be knowing God’s truth or knowing the truth about yourself. Many people live scattered and tumultuous lives trying to live outside of their own boundaries, not accepting and expressing the truth of who they are. Honesty about who you are gives you the biblical value of integrity, or oneness.

Geographical Distance

Proverbs 22:3 says that “the prudent man sees the evil and hides himself.” Sometimes physically removing yourself from a situation will help maintain boundaries. You can do this to replenish yourself

physically, emotionally, and spiritually after you have given to your limit, as Jesus often did.

Or, you can remove yourself to get away from danger and put limits on evil. The Bible urges us to separate from those who continue to hurt us and to create a safe place for ourselves. Removing yourself from the situation will also cause the one who is left behind to experience a loss of fellowship that may lead to changed behavior (Matt. 18:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:11–13).

When a relationship is abusive, many times the only way to finally show the other person that your boundaries are real is to create space until they are ready to deal with the problem. The Bible supports the idea of limiting togetherness for the sake of “binding evil.”

Time

Taking time off from a person, or a project, can be a way of regaining ownership over some out-of-control aspect of your life where boundaries need to be set.

Adult children who have never spiritually and emotionally separated from their parents often need time away. They have spent their whole lives embracing and keeping (Eccl. 3:5–6) and have been afraid to refrain from embracing and to throw away some of their outgrown ways of relating. They need to spend some time building boundaries against the old ways and creating new ways of relating that for a while may feel alienating to their parents. This time apart usually improves their relationship with their parents.

Emotional Distance

Emotional distance is a temporary boundary to give your heart the space it needs to be safe; it is never a permanent way of living. People who have been in abusive relationships need to find a safe place to begin to “thaw out” emotionally. Sometimes in abusive marriages the abused spouse needs to keep emotional distance until the abusive partner begins to face his or her problems and become trustworthy.

You should not continue to set yourself up for hurt and disappointment. If you have been in an abusive relationship, you should

wait until it is safe and until real patterns of change have been demonstrated before you go back. Many people are too quick to trust someone in the name of forgiveness and not make sure that the other is producing “fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8). To continue to open yourself up emotionally to an abusive or addicted person without seeing true change is foolish. Forgive, but guard your heart until you see sustained change.

Other People

You need to depend on others to help you set and keep boundaries. People subject to another person’s addictions, control, or abuse are finding that after years and years of “loving too much,” they can find the ability to create boundaries only through a support group. Their support system is giving them the strength to say no to abuse and control for the first time in their lives.

There are two reasons why you need others to help with boundaries. The first is that *your most basic need in life is for relationship*. People suffer much to have relationships, and many put up with abuse because they fear their partners will leave them and they will be alone if they stand up to them. Fear of being alone keeps many in hurtful patterns for years. They are afraid that if they set boundaries they will not have any love in their life.

When they open themselves up to support from others, however, they find that the abusive person is not the only source of love in the world and that they can find the strength through their support system to set the limits they need to set. They are no longer alone. The church of Christ is there to give strength to ward off the blows against them.

The other reason we need others is because *we need new input and teaching*. Many people have been taught by their church or their family that boundaries are unbiblical, mean, or selfish. These people need good biblical support systems to help them stand against the guilt that comes from the old “tapes” inside that tell them lies to keep them in bondage. They need supportive others to stand against the old messages and the guilt involved in change. In Part II we will be discussing in greater detail how to build boundaries in all the

primary relationships in your life. Our point for now is that boundaries are not built in a vacuum; *creating boundaries always involves a support network.*

Consequences

Trespassing on other people's property carries consequences. "No Trespassing" signs usually carry a threat of prosecution if someone steps over the boundaries. The Bible teaches this principle over and over, saying that if we walk one way, this will happen, and if we walk another way, something else will happen.

Just as the Bible sets consequences for certain behaviors, we need to back up our boundaries with consequences. How many marriages could have been saved if one spouse had followed through with the threat of "if you don't stop drinking" (or "coming home at midnight," or "hitting me," or "yelling at the kids"), I will leave until you get some treatment!" Or how many young adults' lives would have been turned around if their parents had followed through with their threat of "no more money if you quit another job without having further employment" or "no bed if you continue to smoke marijuana in my house."

Paul is not kidding in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 when he says that if anyone will not work, don't let him or her eat. God does not enable irresponsible behavior. Hunger is a consequence of laziness (Prov. 16:26).

Consequences give some good "barbs" to fences. They let people know the seriousness of the trespass and the seriousness of our respect for ourselves. This teaches them that our commitment to living according to helpful values is something we hold dear and will fight to protect and guard.

What's Within My Boundaries?

The story of the Good Samaritan is a model of correct behavior in many dimensions. It is a good illustration of boundaries—when they should be both observed and violated. Imagine for a moment how the story might read if the Samaritan were a boundaryless person.

Setting boundaries inevitably involves taking responsibility for your choices. You are the one who makes them. You are the one who must live with their consequences. And you are the one who may be keeping yourself from making the choices you could be happy with.

Values

What we value is what we love and assign importance to. Often we do not take responsibility for what we value. We are caught up in valuing the approval of men rather than the approval of God (John 12:43); because of this misplaced value, we miss out on life. We think that power, riches, and pleasure will satisfy our deepest longing, which is really for love.

When we take responsibility for out-of-control behavior caused by loving the wrong things, or valuing things that have no lasting value, when we confess that we have *a heart that values things that will not satisfy*, we can receive help from God and his people to “create a new heart” within us. Boundaries help us not to deny but to own our old hurtful values so God can change them.

Limits

Two aspects of limits stand out when it comes to creating better boundaries. The first is *setting limits on others*. This is the component that we most often hear about when we talk about boundaries. In reality, setting limits on others is a misnomer. We can’t do that. What we *can* do is set limits on our own exposure to people who are behaving poorly; we can’t change them or make them behave right.

Our model is God. He does not really “set limits” on people to “make them” behave. God sets standards, but he lets people be who they are and then separates himself from them when they misbehave, saying in effect, “You can be that way if you choose, but you cannot come into my house.” Heaven is a place for the repentant, and all are welcome.

But God limits his exposure to evil, unrepentant people, as should we. Scripture is full of admonitions to separate ourselves

from people who act in destructive ways (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:9–13). We are not being unloving. Separating ourselves protects love, because we are taking a stand against things that destroy love.

The other aspect of limits that is helpful when talking about boundaries is *setting our own internal limits*. We need to have spaces inside ourselves where we can have a feeling, an impulse, or a desire, without acting it out. *We need self-control without repression.*

We need to be able to say no to ourselves. This includes both our destructive desires and some good ones that are not wise to pursue at a given time. Internal structure is a very important component of boundaries and identity, as well as ownership, responsibility, and self-control.

Talents

Contrast these two responses:

“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”

“You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.” (Matt. 25:23, 26–28)

No other passage better illustrates God-ordained responsibility for ownership and use of talents. Although the example is of money, it also applies to internal talents and gifts. Our talents are clearly within our boundaries and are our responsibility. Yet taking ownership of them is often frightening and always risky.

The parable of the talents says that we are accountable—not to mention much happier—when we are exercising our gifts and being productive. It takes work, practice, learning, prayer, resources, and grace to overcome the fear of failure that the “wicked and lazy”

Chapter 3

Boundary Problems

Following a day-long seminar that we were leading on biblical boundaries, a woman raised her hand and said, “I understand that I have boundary problems. But my estranged husband’s the one who had an affair and took all our money. Doesn’t he have a problem with boundaries?”

It’s easy to misunderstand boundaries. At first glance, it seems as if the individual who has difficulty setting limits is the one who has the boundary problem; however, people who don’t respect others’ limits also have boundary problems. The woman above may have difficulty setting limits, but, in addition, her husband hasn’t respected her limits.

In this chapter, we’ll categorize the main types of boundary problems, providing you some pegs on which to hang your thoughts. You’ll see that boundary conflicts are by no means limited to those who “can’t say no.”

Compliants: Saying “Yes” to the Bad

“May I tell you something embarrassing?” Robert asked me. A new client, Robert was trying to understand why he had so much difficulty refusing his wife’s constant demands. He was going broke trying to keep up with the Joneses.

“I was the only boy in my family, the youngest of four children. There was a strange double standard in my house involving physical fighting.” Robert cleared his throat, struggling to continue. “My sisters were three to seven years older than me. Until I was in sixth grade, they were a lot bigger and stronger. They’d take advantage of their size and strength and wale on me until I was bruised. I mean, they really hurt me.

“The strangest part of it all was my parents’ attitude. They’d tell us, ‘Robert is the boy. Boys don’t hit girls. It’s bad manners.’ Bad manners! I was getting triple-teamed, and fighting back was bad manners?” Robert stopped. His shame kept him from continuing, but he’d said enough. He had unearthed part of the reason for his conflicts with his wife.

When parents teach children that setting boundaries or saying no is bad, they are teaching them that others can do with them as they wish. They are sending their children defenseless into a world that contains much evil. Evil in the form of controlling, manipulative, and exploitative people. Evil in the form of temptations.

To feel safe in such an evil world, children need to have the power to say things like:

- “No.”
- “I disagree.”
- “I will not.”
- “I choose not to.”
- “Stop that.”
- “It hurts.”
- “It’s wrong.”
- “That’s bad.”
- “I don’t like it when you touch me there.”

Blocking a child’s ability to say no handicaps that child for life. Adults with handicaps like Robert’s have this first boundary injury: they say yes to bad things.

This type of boundary conflict is called *compliance*. Compliant people have fuzzy and indistinct boundaries; they “melt” into the demands and needs of other people. They can’t stand alone, distinct

from people who want something from them. Compliant, for example, pretend to like the same restaurants and movies their friends do “just to get along.” They minimize their differences with others so as not to rock the boat. Compliant are chameleons. After a while it’s hard to distinguish them from their environment.

The inability to say no to the bad is pervasive. Not only does it keep us from refusing evil in our lives, *it often keeps us from recognizing evil*. Many compliant people realize too late that they’re in a dangerous or abusive relationship. Their spiritual and emotional “radar” is broken; they have no ability to guard their hearts (Prov. 4:23).

This type of boundary problem paralyzes people’s no muscles. Whenever they need to protect themselves by saying no, the word catches in their throats. This happens for a number of different reasons:

- Fear of hurting the other person’s feelings
- Fear of abandonment and separateness
- A wish to be totally dependent on another
- Fear of someone else’s anger
- Fear of punishment
- Fear of being shamed
- Fear of being seen as bad or selfish
- Fear of being unspiritual
- Fear of one’s overstrict, critical conscience

This last fear is actually experienced as guilt. People who have an overstrict, critical conscience will condemn themselves for things God himself doesn’t condemn them for. As Paul says, “Since their conscience is weak, it is defiled” (1 Cor. 8:7). Afraid to confront their unbiblical and critical internal parent, they tighten appropriate boundaries.

When we give in to guilty feelings, we are complying with a harsh conscience. This fear of disobeying the harsh conscience translates into an inability to confront others—a saying yes to the bad—because it would cause more guilt.

Biblical compliance needs to be distinguished from this kind of compliance. Matthew 9:13 says that God desires “compassion, and not sacrifice” (NASB). In other words, God wants us to be compliant from the inside out (compassionate), not compliant on the outside and resentful on the inside (sacrificial). Compliant people take on too many responsibilities and set too few boundaries, not by choice, but because they are afraid.

Avoidants: Saying “No” to the Good

The living room suddenly became very quiet. The Bible study group that had been meeting at the Craigs’ house for six months had suddenly become more intimate. Tonight the five couples began to share real struggles in their lives, not just the usual “please pray for Aunt Sarah” requests. Tears were shed, and genuine support, not just well-meaning advice, was offered. Everyone, except the hostess, Rachel Henderson, had taken a turn talking.

Rachel had been the driving force behind the formation of the Bible study. She and her husband, Joe, had developed the format, invited the other couples, and opened up their home to the study. Caught up in her leadership role, however, Rachel never opened up about her struggles. She shied away from such opportunities, preferring instead to help draw out others. Tonight the others waited.

Rachel cleared her throat. Looking around the room, she finally spoke, “After hearing all the other problems in the room, I think the Lord’s speaking to me. He seems to be saying that my issues are nothing compared to what you all deal with. It would be selfish to take up time with the little struggles I face. So . . . who’d like dessert?”

No one spoke. But disappointment was evident on each face. Rachel had again avoided an opportunity for others to love her as they’d been loved by her.

This boundary problem is called *avoidance*: saying no to the good. It’s the inability to ask for help, to recognize one’s own needs, to let others in. Avoidants withdraw when they are in need; they do not ask for the support of others.

Why is avoidance a boundary problem? At the heart of the struggle is a confusion of boundaries as walls. Boundaries are supposed to be able to “breathe,” to be like fences with a gate that can let the good in and the bad out. Individuals with walls for boundaries can let in neither bad nor good. No one touches them.

God designed our personal boundaries to have gates. We should have the freedom to enjoy safe relationships and to avoid destructive ones. God even allows us the freedom to let him in or to close him off:

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” (Rev. 3:20)

God has no interest in violating our boundaries so that he can relate to us. He understands that this would cause injuries of trust. It is our responsibility to open up to him in need and repentance. Yet, for avoidants, opening up to both God and people is almost impossible.

The impermeable boundaries of avoidants cause a rigidity toward their God-given needs. They experience their problems and legitimate wants as something bad, destructive, or shameful.

Some people, like Marti, are both compliants and avoidants. In a recent session, Marti laughed ruefully at herself. “I’m beginning to see a pattern here. When someone needs four hours with me, I can’t say no. When I need someone for ten minutes, I can’t ask for it. Isn’t there a transistor in my head that I can replace?”

Marti’s dilemma is shared by many adults. She says “yes” to the bad (compliant) and says “no” to the good (avoidant). Individuals who have both boundary conflicts not only cannot refuse evil, they are unable to receive the support they so readily offer to others. They are stuck in a cycle of feeling drained, but with nothing to replace the lost energy.

Compliant avoidants suffer from what is called “reversed boundaries.” They have no boundaries where they need them, and they have boundaries where they shouldn’t have them.

Controllers: Not Respecting Others' Boundaries

“What do you mean, you’re quitting? You can’t leave now!” Steve looked across his desk at his administrative assistant. Frank had been working for Steve for several years and was finally fed up. He had given his all to the position, but Steve didn’t know when to back off.

Time after time, Steve would insist on Frank’s spending unpaid time at the office on important projects. Frank had even switched his vacation schedule twice at Steve’s insistence. But the final straw was when Steve began calling Frank at home. An occasional call at home Frank could understand. But almost every day, during dinner-time, the family would wait while Frank had a telephone conference with his boss.

Several times Frank had tried to talk with Steve about the time violations. But Steve never really understood how burned out Frank was. After all, he needed Frank. Frank made him look successful. And it was so easy to get him to work harder.

Steve has a problem hearing and accepting others boundaries. To Steve, no is simply a challenge to change the other person’s mind. This boundary problem is called *control*. Controllers can’t respect others’ limits. They resist taking responsibility for their own lives, so they need to control others.

Controllers believe the old jokes about training top sales people: no means maybe, and maybe means yes. While this may be productive in learning to sell a product, it can wreak havoc in a relationship. Controllers are perceived as bullies, manipulative and aggressive.

The primary problem of individuals *who can’t hear no*—which is different from *not being able to say no*—is that they tend to project responsibility for their lives onto others. They use various means of control to motivate others to carry the load intended by God to be theirs alone.

Remember the “boulder and knapsack” illustration in chapter 2? Controllers look for someone to carry their knapsacks (individual responsibilities) in addition to their boulders (crises and crushing

burdens). Had Steve shouldered the weight of his own job, Frank would have been happy to pitch in extra hours from time to time. But the pressure of covering for Steve's irresponsibility made a talented professional look elsewhere for work.

Controllers come in two types:

1. *Aggressive controllers.* These people clearly don't listen to others' boundaries. They run over other people's fences like a tank. They are sometimes verbally abusive, sometimes physically abusive. But most of the time they simply aren't aware that others even have boundaries. It's as if they live in a world of yes. There's no place for someone else's no. They attempt to get others to change, to make the world fit their idea of the way life should be. They neglect their own responsibility to accept others as they are.

Peter is an example of an aggressive controller. Jesus was telling the disciples about his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:33).

Peter didn't want to accept the Lord's boundaries. Jesus immediately confronted Peter's violation of his boundaries.

2. *Manipulative controllers.* Less honest than the aggressive controllers, manipulators try to persuade people out of their boundaries. They talk others into yes. They indirectly manipulate circumstances to get their way. They seduce others into carrying their burdens. They use guilt messages.

Remember how Tom Sawyer tricked his playmates into whitewashing the fence for him? He made it seem like such a privilege that kids were lined up to paint!

Isaac's son Jacob finagled his twin brother Esau into giving up his birthright (Gen. 25:29–34) and, with his mother's help, deceived his father into bestowing Esau's blessing on him (Gen. 27:1–29). In fact, Jacob's name means "deceiver." Numerous times he used his cleverness to avoid others' boundaries.

The event that helped Jacob work out of his manipulative boundarylessness was his confrontation with God in human form (Gen. 32:24–32). God "wrestled" with him all night long and then

changed his name to Israel. The word *Israel* means “he who fights with God.” God left Jacob with a dislocated thigh.

And Jacob changed. He became less deceitful and more honest. His aggressiveness was clearer, as evidenced by his new name. He was owning his feistiness. Only when the manipulative controller is confronted with his dishonesty can he take responsibility for it, repent of it, and accept his and others’ limits.

Manipulators deny their desires to control others; they brush aside their own self-centeredness. They are like the adulterous woman in Proverbs: “She eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong’” (30:20).

Believe it or not, compliants and avoidants can also be controllers. They tend, however, to be more manipulative than aggressive. When compliant avoidants need emotional support, for example, they may do a favor for a friend. They hope that by being loving, they’ll receive love. So then they wait, anticipating the return of the favor. And sometimes they wait for years. Especially if they performed the favor for someone who can’t read minds.

What’s wrong with this picture? It’s not a picture of love. The love that God talks about doesn’t seek a return on its investment: “It is not self-seeking” (1 Cor. 13:5). Caring for someone so that they’ll care back for us is simply an indirect means of controlling someone else. If you’ve ever been on the “receiving” end of that kind of maneuver, you’ll understand. One minute you’ve taken the compliment, or favor—the next minute you’ve hurt someone’s feelings by not figuring out the price tag attached.

Boundary Injuries

At this point, you might be saying to yourself, “Wait a minute. How can controllers be called ‘injured’? They are the injurers, not the injured!” Indeed, controllers do lots of damage to others, but they also have boundary problems. Let’s see what goes on underneath.

Controllers are undisciplined people. They have little ability to curb their impulses or desires. While it appears that they “get what they want in life,” they are still slaves to their appetites. Delaying gratification is difficult for them. That’s why they hate the word no

from others. They desperately need to learn to listen to the boundaries of others to help them observe their own.

Controllers also are limited in their ability to take responsibility for owning their lives. Having relied on bullying or indirectness, they can't function on their own in the world. The only remedy is to let controllers experience the consequences of their irresponsibility.

Finally, controllers are isolated. People stay with them out of fear, guilt, or dependency. If they're honest, controllers rarely feel loved. Why? Because in their heart of hearts, they know that the only reason people spend time with them is because they are pulling the strings. If they stopped threatening or manipulating, they would be abandoned. And, at some deep level, they are aware of their isolation. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). We can't terrorize or make others feel guilty and be loved by them at the same time.

Nonresponsives: Not Hearing the Needs of Others

Brenda's hand trembled as she talked. "Usually I've got pretty thick skin with Mike. But I guess the past couple of weeks of kid problems and work stresses had me feeling very vulnerable. This time his response didn't make me angry. It just hurt. And it hurt bad."

Brenda was recounting a recent marital struggle. Overall, she thought her marriage to Mike was a good one. He was a good provider, an active Christian, and a competent father. Yet the relationship allowed no room for her hurts or needs.

The incident Brenda was discussing began in a fairly benign manner. She and Mike were talking in the bedroom after putting the kids to bed. Brenda began to unburden her fears about child rearing and her feelings of inadequacy at work.

Without warning, Mike turned to her and said, "If you don't like the way you feel, change your feelings. Life's tough. So just ... just handle it, Brenda."

Brenda was devastated. She felt she should have expected the rebuff. It wasn't that easy to express her neediness in the first place, especially with Mike's coldness. Now she felt as if he had chopped

her feelings to bits. He seemed to have no understanding whatsoever of her struggles—and didn't want to.

How could this be a boundary problem? Isn't it just basic insensitivity? Partially. But it's not quite that simple. Remember that boundaries are a way to describe our spheres of responsibility: what we are and are not responsible for. While we shouldn't take on the responsibility of others' feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, we do have certain responsibilities *to* each other.

Mike does have a responsibility to connect with Brenda, not only as a provider and as a parenting partner, but also as a loving husband. Connecting emotionally with Brenda is part of loving her as himself (Eph. 5:28, 33). He isn't responsible *for* her emotional well-being. *But he is responsible to her.* His inability to respond to her needs is a neglect of his responsibility.

Termed “nonresponsives” because of their lack of attention to the responsibilities of love, these individuals exhibit the opposite of the pattern exhorted in Proverbs 3:27 (NRSV): “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it” (that last phrase, “in your power,” has to do with our resources and availability). Another key Scripture here is “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18 NRSV). Again, note the condition: “so far as it depends on you”: we can't bring peace to someone who doesn't accept it!

Both of the above verses indicate the same idea: we are responsible to care about and help, *within certain limits*, others whom God places in our lives. To refuse to do so when we have the appropriate resources can be a boundary conflict.

Nonresponsives fall into one of two groups:

1. Those with a critical spirit toward others' needs (a projection of our own hatred of our needs onto others, a problem Jesus addressed in Matthew 7:1–5). They hate being incomplete in themselves. As a result, they ignore the needs of others.

2. Those who are so absorbed in their own desires and needs they exclude others (a form of narcissism).

Don't confuse this self-absorption with a God-given sense of taking responsibility for one's own needs first so that one is able to love

others: “Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). God wants us to take care of ourselves so that we can help others without moving into a crisis ourselves.

Controllers and Nonresponsives

Controlling nonresponsives have a hard time looking past themselves. They see others as responsible for their struggles and are on the lookout for someone to take care of them. They gravitate toward someone with blurry boundaries, who will naturally take on too many responsibilities in the relationship and who won't complain about it. It's like the old joke about relationships: What happens when a rescuing, enabling person meets a controlling, insensitive person? Answer: they get married!

Actually, this makes sense. Compliant avoidants search for someone to repair. This keeps them saying yes and keeps them out of touch with their own needs. Who fits the bill better than a controlling nonresponsive? And controlling nonresponsives search for someone to keep them away from responsibility. Who better than a complaint avoidant?

Below is a chart of the four types of boundary problems.¹ It will help you see at a glance the kinds of problems with which you may struggle.

Summary of Boundary Problems

	CAN'T SAY	CAN'T SAY
NO	The Compliant Feels guilty and/or controlled by others; can't set boundaries	The Controller Aggressively or manipulatively violates boundaries of others
YES	The Nonresponsive Sets boundaries against responsibility to love	The Avoidant Sets boundaries against receiving care of others