

Building Better Boundaries

Matthew 5:36-37, *“And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

These are the primary words that are used to set the boundaries of our lives. These are the words that commit us to something, that say, “Yes or no, I’m in or I’m out.”

And I'd like you to consider if there's an area in your life where you are saying yes, and God wants you to say no. Or you're saying no, and God wants you to say yes. Although these words are very important, we can be **incredibly casual** about saying them. We have problems saying the right one at the right time in the right way.

Someone asks, "Would you do this?" "Would you attend this thing? Lead this thing? Commit to this thing?" "Would you watch my **hyperactive** kids for me while my husband and I go to **Hawaii** for a month?" "Would you go on a blind date with my **cousin** this Friday when he gets out of **prison**?"

Although you have a clear "no" in your mind, much to your surprise it's "yes" that jumps out of your mouth. Now, Jesus says the correct use of these two words is vital to human life. Jesus says that generally in our conversation we should simply let our yes be yes and our no, no.

This in the Law of Individual Responsibility. Only you are responsible for your life. If your way of life is damaging your heart and soul, no one else is going to fix that for you.

All the time you're saying yes or no, **yes or no** to financial obligations, relational commitments, family requests, harmful obsessions, how you're going to use your time. You can say yes or no to these things. You have enormous power.

This is the law of responsibility. Jesus was a master at this. He said yes to that which needed a yes, even when it was costly. His yes was yes and His no was no. He lived with great freedom and great purpose. And he said **you** ought to live the same way.

A boundary is a kind of personal property line that marks me off as an individual. I have my own gifts; my own passions, my own identity, and my own responsibility. A clear sense of boundary means I understand what I'm responsible for and what I'm not responsible for.

It means I understand that: **This is my one and only life**, and I will one day give account for my life. Hebrews 9:27, *“Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”*

Your job is to live a life that **pleases God**, and to **love people**. But don't get those confused, because if you go through life trying to please all the people in your life, you will miss what God has in mind for your one and only life.

My life does not belong to my boss, my parents, my friends, my neighbors, my spouse. They're important, but **they will not give an account to God for my life, and I will not give an account to God for their lives.**

If I don't have a clear sense of the boundaries He's calling me to set in my life, I end up over committed, self-absorbed, and resentful. It is crucial that you understand that when we speak of boundaries we are talking about **who** God made us to be and **what** God called us to do.

1. In general, there are **two kinds of boundary problems** that people have. **There are** people who tend to be **compliant** and people who tend to be **controlling**.

Compliants have a hard time saying no. If you're a compliant, this word does not come easily for you. Compliants tend to have **fuzzy boundaries**.

So often, they end up saying yes even though they want to say no. They avoid conflict. They don't want to hurt some one's feelings, and they don't want anyone to not like them.

I'll tell you a **little secret** about compliants. Sometimes compliants are not as nice as they appear because inside there is resentment, a hidden life, that often is seething.

The other category is **controllers**. If a compliant has a hard time **saying** no, the controller has a hard time **hearing** the word "no." They may say no easily. They may have a hard time saying yes, but when somebody says no to a controller, the controller hears "maybe." When somebody says "maybe," the controller hears "yes."

Controllers come in **different flavors**. Some are **aggressive** controllers. They'll steamroll over folks. They push and intimidate and shove and raise their voice. They won't take no for an answer.

Then some people are **manipulative** controllers. It's not obvious with them. They might not even think about themselves as controllers.

But in both cases, aggressive and manipulative controllers have a hard time accepting limits. They may know their own boundaries clearly, but they **don't respect** other people's boundaries. Some of you may be controllers.

Question: What happens when a peace-loving compliant meets an insensitive controller? **They get married**. They do. At first it works out well because the compliant person is like a wonderful toy for the controlling person. *"Let's see what I can make this person do."* And the compliant does it so it works out real well. **But eventually** the compliant person begins to resent it. The controller tries to get the compliant to do something, and the compliant doesn't want to. But what the compliant person says is, *"You really want me to do this? All right, if you insist."* **Now when the compliant says**, *"Well, all right, if you insist,"* which word does the compliant really mean to say? **No!** But what does the controller hear? **Yes.** *"If I insist? Well, of course, I insist. The ball is on the one yard line. I just have to move it into the end zone. Certainly, I insist."* **The controller doesn't** really mind if the compliant stews. The controller wants to control more than he wants to be well thought of. The compliant wants to be well thought of more than he wants to control. It leads into a lot of relational struggles.

Whichever side you tend to fall on, the compliant side or the controller side, you can damage your own heart and damage other people. So getting a clear sense of boundaries, is crucial. hesitant

Lets look at **four key areas** of life where having clear boundaries is essential.

1. We need boundaries for good friendships. We all want to have healthy, God-honoring friendships. This is a real **important point**. Effective, long-lasting friendships are reciprocated. They involve mutual give and take.

Most of us have been in a relationship where you feel like you're the one that's always giving. You always make the phone call; you always invest the energy to make sure you get together. It feels like if you didn't, the friendship would die. That relationship has boundary problems.

There's an important thing about healthy friendships that you need to understand. **Relationships involve limits because we are finite, limited people.**

Love involves limits. An example of this is the story about the **Good Samaritan**. There is love expressed -- but there are limits to it. **A man is beaten up** and left by the side of the road. Two religious types come by but their boundaries are so rigid they don't even look at the guy. They won't give him any help at all. They have the kind of boundary problems where they say no when they ought to say yes.

But then a Samaritan comes along and he's moved with compassion. There's an appropriate level of openness to his heart.

So he bandages the guy up, takes him to an inn and tells the innkeeper, *"I have to leave on some business, but take care of this man, and I will reimburse any expenses that are incurred."*

The Samaritan helps, but helping has limits. He bandages the man up, but he doesn't perform surgery. He takes him to an inn. He doesn't have the guy move into his house. He pays for a few days' expenses. He doesn't give him a blank check. There are limits.

Now perhaps you are in a relationship where limits need to be set. Maybe you're the one that always initiates being together. You need to talk to the other person about that because that kind of friendship is not going to be sustainable over the long haul.

And maybe every time you're together the **focus** is always on that other person's needs or problems or agenda. If you don't talk about that with your friend, they're going to push everyone away from them because of their obsession with themselves.

Someone needs to love them enough to speak truth, and it should be somebody who considers themselves to be a friend. Some of you have such a person in your life, and you need to have a real frank talk about your relationship.

Maybe your boundaries are too rigid. Maybe you have been withholding help that you should give.

Maybe you don't have any close friends, because when the moment comes to be vulnerable and disclose your heart, you say no when you ought to say yes. Some of you may need to take a relational risk if you ever want to live in intimate friendship.

2. The **second** area is **families**. Families are the place where we learn about boundaries.

Around the age of two a child will learn two words and it will become the child's favorite words. Anyone want to guess what they are? **(Mine! & No!)** "Drink my milk? Eat my vegetables? Take a nap? I don't think so! **No!**"

The child will grow to love those words and say them with great joy. Parents get tired of hearing it, but learning to say no is a very important exercise for the child's development. "No" is maybe the most important boundary word. You want your kids to be able to say it.

What happens to many **compliant**s is they never say no unless they get furiously mad. Then they're able to say no, but they can't say it calmly and they can't say it in love.

But there's something else. Children also **need to learn to hear** the word "no." I am concerned that there are families where children are not appropriately hearing the word "no" and learning to understand that there are boundaries that are set for them.

Children don't like boundaries. But children desperately need parents who, with love and wisdom, set boundaries and make sure the boundaries have consequences. There is a spiritual law at work here that is called the **law of reaping and sowing**.

Paul wrote the church in Galatia, "*Don't be deceived. God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.*" Galatians 6:7. The Bible says that this is the way life is -- **actions have consequences**. If you smoke, that's going to have consequences for your lungs. If you spend heavily it is going to have consequences on your financial life.

If you go through life evading and manipulating and deceiving, that will have consequences for your relationships and for your soul. The sooner you learn that you reap what you sow, that actions have consequences, the better off you will be.

The **law of reaping and sowing** is one of the most important things for children to learn. We do not do them a favor when, for misguided reasons, we prevent them from learning that. Families get in trouble when parents take **inappropriate responsibility** for their children's problems.

For example, imagine a child says "**I'm bored.**" It's hard to imagine in our day. We have more options, electronic games, sports, recreation, and activities than ever before in the history of the world. But just imagine if a child were to say, "I'm bored."

Here's what often happens: **Parents start suggesting ideas**. "*You could ride your bike. It's a beautiful day, the sun is shining, the sky is blue. That's a great idea. What do you think about that.*"

What does the kid say? "*No, I don't think so. What else you got?*" Then the parent keeps proposing things, and the kids keep shooting them down until eventually the parent hits on something that costs an enormous amount of money: "*I could take you to Disney Land and give you \$1,000 to spend.*" And the kid says, "*Okay. I'll give that one a shot.*"

Friends, this is real important. If a child is bored, who has the problem? The child or the parent? **The child has a problem.**

A child's boredom is not the parent's problem. When a child comes to a parent and says, "*I'm bored,*" the appropriate response is for the parent to say something like, "*That's a serious problem. You have just sized the situation up really well. You have put your finger right on it, honey.*"

"You are bored. I've seen bored people before, and you're one of them. But, you are a bright kid, and I know you're going to figure out a really good solution to this problem." Then you walk away.

If you don't do this, you are teaching your child that his feeling bored is someone else's problem.

He or she will go through their life expecting other people to make their boredom or sadness or pain or whatever go away, and they will never get clarity on the fact that what lies inside the boundaries of my life is my responsibility, and I will reap whatever I sow.

If I sow love and joy and patience and responsibility, then I will reap life. If I sow hatred, hostility, sloth and irresponsibility, I'll reap death. If people don't learn that as they're growing up, then God help the parents and God help the children.

Children desperately need to learn that there are boundaries. And that those boundaries have consequences. Every child needs to learn that they can **say** no, and still be loved, and every child needs to learn to **hear** the word no or they will not be equipped to deal with life.

3. The third area is work. There is a time to say yes to work, and there is a time to say no to work. When you're at work, work, devote yourself to work.

Ecclesiastes 9:10, "*Whatever your hand finds for you to do, do it with all your might.*" Paul said, "*When you work, work as unto the Lord as if God were your supervisor, as if your work were a gift to Him.*"

You need to wholeheartedly say yes to work when you're at work. But some are so obsessed with work, that they do not have the energy or ability to be the kind of spouse or parent or friend that they know God wants them to be. They are not able to be involved in ministry.

Your choices about work are **your** choices, and this is your one and only life. Do you need to make some changes?

4. The last ones I want to talk about are **spiritual boundaries**. Saying yes to God means saying no to anything that gets in the way of following him -- no to temptation, no to peer pressure.

The Bible says, *"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'" Exodus 32:1*

In other words, the people told Aaron, *"We're bored. We're impatient waiting around here. Who knows when God is going to tell us we can go. So we want some other god."*

Aaron needed to say **one word**. Which word was it? **"No!** *You must be crazy! There's one God. I'm going to worship him alone. You can all leave, I'm staying here. God is my God."*

Some of you may be at a place right now where you are tempted to walk a different path. Maybe to be involved in deception; maybe to be involved in sexual behavior that is not pleasing to God. Maybe some kind of financial or ethical misconduct, and now it's your faith in the balance whether you say no or not.

If you follow God, **there will be times when you're tested**. You'd better decide ahead of time what you're going to say.

"He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold and cast an image of a calf." Then he said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Exodus 32:4. Aaron was the compliant guy: "You want gods? Okay, I'll make you one."

Moses comes down from Mount Sinai, and he's **furious**, Moses says to Aaron, *"What did this people do to you that you've brought so great a sin upon them? Exodus 32:31. Did they torture you or threaten to kill you? What in the world induced you to do such a thing?"*

Now, this is another boundary challenge. Will Aaron take responsibility for what he's done? If he'll say, "Yes, I did this thing, and it was wrong, and I see it," he can begin to heal.

Look at what he does say, *"Aaron said, 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot.'" Exodus 32:22.*

This is the classic kind of response for a compliant person: Moses, you're mad at me. I don't want you to be mad at me. Don't be mad at me. You know the people, Moses, it's not really me. You know the people. They're bent on evil. They said to me, *'Make us gods who shall go before us.'* 32:1.

God sets the **boundary**. Instead of saying no, Aaron gives in, steps over the boundary, and then refuses to take responsibility so the healing can begin. Some of you may have crossed way over a boundary, and your healing won't start until you say, **"I did it," until you take responsibility** and just fall on your knees before God.

God is gracious and will forgive anyone who will ask, **but you have to ask.** Sometimes saying yes to God means saying no to pressures, demands, temptations, and sometimes it means saying no to people.

Imagine if you said yes when you should say -- yes to God's gifts and yes to God's calling for your life and yes to a life of serving. And imagine your saying no when you ought to say no -- no to sin, no to guilt, and no to fear and no to exhaustion.

Jesus says, **"Let your yes be yes, and your no be no."** What do you say?