



Two Kinds of Boundaries (God's and Ours)

Nowadays boundaries are a hot topic. Books describe them; speakers laud their value; and experts from counselors to life coaches teach us how to set them.

The current focus on boundaries makes sense, because boundaries are necessary. They help define us and protect us. Without them, we lose our individual distinctiveness and forfeit the ability to choose. Boundaries have great value; they also can cause great harm. It all depends on *who* makes the boundaries and *why* they do it.

Man-made boundaries differ from God-made boundaries both in content and in motive. Boundaries set by God permit and support life and love. Boundaries we set have a less sterling outcome.

Man-Made Boundaries

I can't count the number of times I've listened to someone describe with pride (and relief) the boundaries they've set up. They tell me they've finally realized they have to have to learn to love themselves before they can love someone else. "I need to love myself" sounds like a wise statement – until you get to what people usually mean by those words. They don't mean they need to agree with God about their value (a good choice). Instead they mean "I have to take care of my needs before I consider yours." (That's not how Jesus lived.)

I also frequently hear the term "safe people." It's used to endorse the importance of avoiding people that make us uncomfortable. (That's also not how Jesus lived.)

*Jesus didn't serve Himself at our expense,
nor did He limit His contacts to safe people.
I'm so glad.*

People rightly recognize the necessity of boundaries – we just aren't very skilled at choosing boundaries that promote life and love. The boundaries we design tend to be self-serving, divisive idols that we falsely assume will solve every relational problem.

Why are the boundaries we set so skewed? Because we hold skewed values. These values have become so familiar we don't even recognize their presence. Let me clarify with a few examples:

- We live in a culture which values personal needs above care for our community. We feel justified in holding a "me-first" attitude and end up caring for ourselves at the cost of loving others.
- On all sides (even within ourselves) we encounter a love of power and a corresponding disrespect for others.

- We may have had our own individuality invaded by others so profoundly that we believe we routinely need to keep others distant in an ongoing desperate quest to gain a sense of self and safety.
- We may be convinced that we're worth less than others and need to put walls around our reputations lest we look foolish or flawed.

Whatever the motivation to set our own boundaries, the boundaries we produce tend to be inflexible, fear-based, intolerant, self-serving, and rigid. To our Lord's sorrow, we l put up barriers that exclude love and restrict our relationships to people we perceive as comfortable and safe.

We'd do better to imitate God.

God's Kind of Boundaries

If you read carefully through Genesis 1, you'll notice that God isn't producing rigid boundaries. He separates day and night – yet twilight ushers the one into the other. Beach and the ocean stay beach and ocean – yet their edges overlap. God's reassuring distinctions involve fluid movement. His boundaries are stable, yet alive.

Notice *who* establishes these physical boundaries: God. Notice also *why* God establishes such boundaries: He's bringing the beauty of order into a chaotic world. His motive is to create a physical environment that permits and enhances life.

God kind of creation extends beyond the *physical* world. God builds boundaries into our *personal* worlds as well. These personal boundaries often go unnoticed (or unbelieved). Our ignorance leads us to try to provide such necessary boundaries for ourselves.

We waste a lot of time trying to gain (and maintain) boundaries God has *already* put into place. We spent a great deal of time trying to gain a sense of dignity – typically with a variety of self-serving "walls" like acting like we're better than others or isolating ourselves behind a façade of power. But God has *already* given us dignity. We waste more time trying to prove that we are individuals – using barriers like always having to be right or by refusing to cooperate with others. But God has *already* given us individuality. We spend anxious hours protecting ourselves from unknown evils. But God has *already* placed Himself between us and disaster.

God has put within our personal lives boundaries that He maintains. Dignity, individuality, hiding us within Himself – these and many others. We don't need to add to His provision. God has given us all the boundaries we need.

God's boundaries arise from His love and bring us life.

Let's Make This Personal

- Can you care for and serve others without losing a sense of your distinctiveness from them?
- Philippians 2:5-6 tells us to have the same attitude as Jesus "who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." Do you regard equality with other people as a thing for which you must strive?
- Do the boundaries that you depend on resemble God's boundaries? Check it out. Think about appropriate and inappropriate boundaries in your life.

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