

# Take back control of your life!

## Take the **Boundaries Builder 5-Day Challenge.**



Do you feel like other people have more control over your life than they should? Do you feel guilty or afraid when you consider telling someone “no”? Maybe it’s time to learn the power of setting boundaries. Get answers to these issues:

- **How do I set limits and still be a loving person?**
- **What does a legitimate boundary look like?**
- **What can I do when someone wants more time, love, energy, or money than I’m comfortable giving?**

Many people focus so much on being loving and unselfish that they forget their own limits and limitations. That’s why the ability to set clear boundaries is essential to a healthy, balanced lifestyle. A boundary is a personal property line that marks those things for which we are responsible. In other words, boundaries define who you are and who you are not.

However, building boundaries can seem like a confusing or daunting idea to some people. So, we invite you to take the **Boundaries Builder 5-Day Challenge**. By using this 18-page resource over the next five days, you’ll discover the power that healthy boundaries can bring to your life and most important relationships.

**Day 1 – The Purpose of Boundaries**

**Day 2 – Identify Your Boundary Busters**

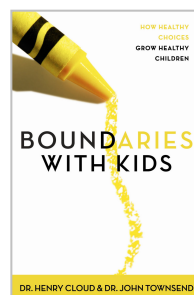
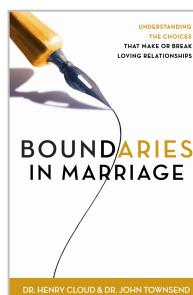
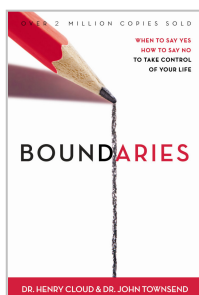
**Day 3 – Addressing Boundaries Issues in Marriage**

**Day 4 – Addressing Boundaries Issues with Your Kids**

**Day 5 – Measuring Your Success with Boundaries**

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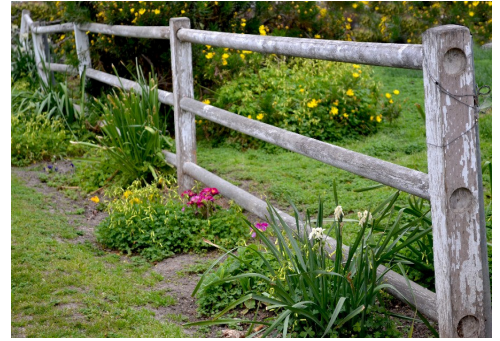


# Day 1

## The Purpose of Boundaries

### What Are Boundaries?

In the physical world, boundaries are easy to see. Fences, signs, walls, 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.



In the spiritual and relational world, boundaries are just as real, but often harder to see. Our goal is to help you define your intangible boundaries and to recognize them as an ever-present 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.

Boundaries help distinguish your property so that you can take care of it. The goal is to keep things that will nurture you inside your fences and keep things that will harm you outside. In short, ***boundaries help you keep the good in and the bad out.***

Just as homeowners set physical property lines around their land, you need to set mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for your life to help distinguish what is your responsibility and what is not. The inability to set appropriate boundaries at appropriate times with the appropriate people can be very destructive.

### A Lack of Consequences Can Create a Lack of Boundaries

Behaviors have consequences. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul says, “A man reaps what he sows” (see Galatians 6:7 – 8). For example, if we study, we will reap good grades. If we go to work, we will get a paycheck. If we exercise, we will be in better health. If we act lovingly toward others, we will have closer relationships. On the negative side, if we sow idleness, irresponsibility, or out-of-control behavior, we can expect to reap poverty, failure, and the effects of loose living. These are natural consequences of our behavior.

The problem comes when someone interrupts the law of sowing and reaping in another’s life. A person’s drinking or abuse should have consequences for the drinker or the abuser. Proverbs 15:10 says, “Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path.” To rescue people from the natural consequences of their behavior is to render them powerless.

For example, married couples and parents often yell and nag their spouse and children, instead of allowing the other person to reap the natural consequences of their behavior. Interacting with love and limits, with warmth and consequences, produces confident people and kids who have a sense of control over their lives.

We need to take responsibility for our choices. This leads to the fruit of “self-control” (Gal. 5:23). A common boundary problem is disowning our choices and trying to lay the responsibility for them on someone else. Think for a moment how often we use the

phrases, “I had to” or “She (he) made me” when explaining why we did or did not do something. These phrases betray our basic illusion that we are not active agents in many of our dealings. We think someone else is in control, thus relieving us of our basic responsibility. We need to realize that we are in control of our choices, no matter how we feel.

Making decisions based on others’ approval or based on a sense of guilt breeds resentment. In addition, we can become so trained by others on what we “should” do that we think we are being loving when we are actually do things out of compulsion.

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.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. Do you tend to feel responsible for other people’s feelings, choices, and behaviors? Do you attempt to minimize the consequences they might experience because you can’t bear to see them hurt?
2. Are you willing to change your behavior to act on what you are only are responsible for, rather than over-rescuing or blaming someone else?
3. How often do you use the phrases “I had to” or “he/she made me” when you explain why you did or didn’t do something?

### **Prayer**

Father God, you have seen where I have failed to establish boundaries, where I have failed to build “gates” in my “fences,” and where I am keeping out good and keeping in bad. You also know the reasons for these things — the past hurts, the poor models, the misunderstood Christian teachings. And you know, too, the hope I’ve found as I’ve realized that you call me to establish boundaries and that you yourself model them for me. Teach me, as I proceed through this study, to take responsibility for my feelings, behaviors, and choices. Help me establish appropriate and biblical boundaries so that I may glorify you with my life. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## Day 2

### Identify Your Boundary Busters

Before you can build appropriate boundaries, it's important to identify the reasons why setting boundaries may be difficult. Let's look at the four main types of boundary busters. Read through the explanations for each type and ask yourself which category you may fall into by answering the questions listed in each section.



#### **Boundary Buster 1: Compliant – Saying “Yes” to the Bad**

Compliant people have fuzzy and indistinct boundaries. They “melt” into the demands and needs of other people. Compliant people are chameleons. Their inability to say no to the bad in life is pervasive, and it keeps them from refusing and even recognizing evil or unhealthy situations. Their spiritual and emotional “radar” is broken; they have little ability to guard their hearts.

#### **Questions for Reflection**

1. If you are a compliant, there are several reasons why the word “no” seems to get stuck in your throat whenever you need to protect yourself. Which of these reasons are true for you?
  - Fear of hurting the other person’s feelings
  - Fear of abandonment and separateness
  - Fear of someone else’s anger
  - Fear of punishment
  - Fear of being shamed
  - Fear of being seen as bad or selfish
  - Fear of your own overstrict, critical conscience
2. When have you been compliant on the outside and resentful on the inside as you said yes to some responsibility?

#### **Boundary Buster 2: Avoidant – Saying “No” to the Good**

Avoidance is the inability to ask for help, to recognize one’s own needs, and to let the good into your life. Avoidants tend to withdraw when they are in need; they do not ask for the support of other people. They avoid opportunities for others to love them as they have loved 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” and 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.

### Questions for Reflection

1. The impermeable boundaries of avoidants cause a rigid unacceptance of God-given needs. For instance, do you experience your problems, legitimate needs, and wants as something bad, destructive, or shameful? Where do you think you learned that?
2. Have you allowed boundaries in your life to get “reversed?” Do you have boundaries where you shouldn’t have them but no boundaries where you need them? Name specific examples.

### Boundary Buster 3: Controlling – Not Respecting Others’ Boundaries

Controllers see a person’s “no” as a challenge to change his or her mind. Controllers can’t respect other people’s limits. They resist taking responsibility for their lives, so they try to control other people’s lives. Controllers are therefore perceived as manipulative and aggressive bullies.

The primary problem of individuals who can’t hear “no” is that they tend to project responsibility for their lives onto others. They use aggressive or manipulative control to motivate others to carry the load that God intended to be theirs alone.

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 can feel isolated and unloved, because the people around them are there out of fear, guilt, or dependency. Controllers can’t terrorize or make others feel guilty and be loved at the same time. At some deep level, controllers are aware of their isolation.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Based on this description, would you be considered a controlling person? Or, do you tend to let controlling people dictate your decisions?
2. When have you felt an aggressive controller’s failure to accept you as you are? How did you respond and how did you feel?
3. In what relationships or situations have you been perceived as a controller? Why was it important for you to have control in that situation?

### Boundary Buster 4: Nonresponsive – Not Hearing the Needs of Others

The term “nonresponsive” means an individual who does not pay attention to the responsibilities of love. While we shouldn’t take on the responsibility of others’ feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, we are responsible to care about and help, within certain limits, the people whom God places in our lives. Nonresponsives fall into one of two groups:



1. Those with a critical spirit toward others' needs. They can act cold or show a lack of empathy for other people's struggles. As a result, they ignore their responsibility to show concern for the people around them.

2. Those who are so absorbed in their own desires and needs that they exclude others, which is a form of narcissism.

A nonresponsive person is someone who doesn't respond to the needs of people around them. And, don't confuse this self-absorption as taking responsibility for one's own needs first so that one is able to love others. The Bible says in Philippians 2:4, "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

### Questions for Reflection

1. When have you been a nonresponsive and failed to act according to your responsibilities to love another person?
2. Have you interacted with a nonresponsive individual? What kind of response had you hoped for, and what kind of response did you receive?

### Summary of Boundary Busters

	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 Non-Responsive: Sets boundaries against responsibility to love	The Avoidant: Sets boundaries against receiving care of others

### Questions for Reflection

1. In the chart above, which quadrant do you see yourself?
2. Which quadrants would you categorize the people you are struggling with in your life?

### Prayer

Father God, you know the boundaries problems I am dealing with. Teach me to have the preparation, initiative, and discipline to speak the truth in love to those with whom I am in relationship. I have so much to learn, God, and I am thankful for the opportunity to do so. Teach me, God, the responsibilities of love so that I may extend to the people in my life the love you have so graciously extended to me.

## Day 3

### Addressing Boundaries Issues in Marriage

*Note: If you are not married, read this material with a focus on how it could benefit dating relationships or future spouse.*

When God created marriage, he gave us one of his best gifts. He provided a permanent and safe connection for a man and a woman to experience love, joy, meaning, and purpose together: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

Because marriage is such a wonderful type of relationship, confrontation within the marital relationship is very important. You are a central delivery system for grace and truth in your spouse’s life, and vice versa. You have a responsibility to both care for and confront one another. You are an agent for change and growth in each other. Love does not blind either of you to the other’s problems; in fact, love demands that you pay attention to them so that you can help resolve them.

Who is better qualified to understand and speak to someone about a problem than the person who is living life right next to him? You are intimately involved with him. You see the real person, imperfections and all. His ways and actions affect you; you are not dispassionate about him. More than anyone, a spouse should be able to see what her partner’s true problems are.

The irony is that the very closeness of marriage partners makes confrontation more difficult. When two people pass through the idealizing honeymoon season and dive into knowing each other in day-to-day life, they see the problems, weaknesses, immaturities, sins, and eccentricities of the other person. And often, because of this awareness, a spouse will dismiss her mate’s feedback and truth about her. It is as if she is saying, “Since I know you aren’t perfect either, you have no credibility to confront me.”

Therefore, building boundaries in marriage means that there can be built-in resistance from your spouse regarding the conversation. Utilize these guidelines to have a healthy confrontation:

#### **1. Be the Best Spouse Possible**

Though you can’t be perfect, you do owe it to your mate to be the best “fit” that you can be. Sacrifice your comfort to his legitimate and appropriate needs and wants. Get into the growth process and learn to love and care about his life. Repent of and change whatever habits and patterns are bad for you, him, and the relationship. He is more likely to be open to hearing the truth from someone who is growing, involved, fun, and fully living life. People who are involved in the life of God stand a better chance of influencing their spouses than those who are standing on the sidelines of life.



## **2. Appeal to the Relationship Itself**

When you bring up a problem, let your spouse know that you are doing so because it affects you, her, and “us.” Here’s what a conversation might look like:

*You:* “I am not telling you this because I want to fix or change you. I want more closeness and good times with you, but this problem is like a boulder between us; I can’t get around it to get back to you. I want to get it out of the way so I can get back to us. The problem causes me to miss you.”

*Your spouse:* “You’re not being loving with me.”

*You:* “I’m sorry it feels that way, and I want you to know I love you. But I need to get back to the problem, because it really affects our relationship.”

## **3. Use Your History and Credibility**

In marriage you have, in a way, earned the right to be heard. Without sounding superior, let your spouse know that you have been around him or her long enough to see the patterns you are concerned about. For example, say something like, “I am not basing this on one event. I have seen it happen many times over the past few months. I live with you, so it’s pretty clear what’s going on.”

In addition, use your “spousal equity” to bring up the effects of your mate’s behavior on you. Your lives are intertwined, so what he is doing most likely has a large effect on you. Make that part of the conversation. Go over the emotional, relational, and practical results of the problem.

## **4. Persist**

If the problem you want to talk about has been going on for a while, chances are you will not get immediate results the first time you bring it up. Your spouse may be set in his or her ways. This is even more likely if your previous attempts at confrontation were poorly done. Your spouse may ignore you or react, hoping you will drop it. As a result, it is easy to fall prey to thinking, I brought it up, and it didn’t work, so that’s just the way it is.

However, a bad outcome is not cause for dropping the issue. If the problem is serious enough to hurt you, your spouse, and the relationship, it needs to be addressed more than once. Often the spouse doesn’t understand how strongly her mate feels until he goes to the trouble to bring it up again. Let your spouse know how strongly you feel about solving the problem by saying something like this:

*You:* “I know you aren’t comfortable with this topic. I’m not either. But it’s important enough to me that I will keep addressing it with you until it’s resolved one way or another. Is there another time we can talk, or another way we can talk about it that will be easier for you?”

*Your spouse:* “I don’t want to talk. It’s not my problem.”

*You:* “I know this is uncomfortable for you, but I have to insist that we talk sometime soon. What works for you?”



## **5. Learn to Persist If You Feel Unable to Persist**

You may find that persisting is difficult for you. Often, this has to do with a dread of conflict. You're not used to it, and you fear the possible repercussions. You had to work up a lot of courage even to bring up the problem. So when your spouse ignores it or gets defensive, you feel relieved to let it go. The despair and resignation are a little more tolerable than the anxiety.

If this is your situation, get outside help on confrontation. Use friends, a support group, or a mentor to help you work through your fears of telling your spouse the truth. Once you become more comfortable with the language of honesty, you will be more able to persist. Persistence pays off.

## **6. Realize That Your Spouse Needs Something from You**

Sometimes a spouse has problems with confrontation because he or she feels powerless and helpless. There is fear that words will have no effect: "She won't listen, I can't control her, I don't matter to her, why should she listen to me?"

This is often a misconception. The reality is that an out-of-control person is more likely to be very dependent on the spouse. This is because the spouse is often unknowingly enabling, rescuing and protecting the out-of-control mate from the consequence of her ways. He or she needs their spouse's responsibility, structure, acceptance, and other strengths. Without those things, he or she would most likely be in a lot of pain due to their behavior. The enabler is the strong one, though it doesn't look like it from the outside. Use this reality in your confrontation. If your mate is not responsive to you on the problem, say something like this:

*You:* "I don't think you are taking this seriously, and it's a serious matter. I really want you to change in this area. I have appealed to our relationship and to the possible hurt you are going to cause. But if this is not enough, I will need to start removing things in our relationship that you want and value. I don't want to, but if that is what it takes for you to take responsibility for your problem, I'm willing to."

*Your spouse:* "Go ahead, you're destroying us."

*You:* "I'm sorry you feel I'm doing that. It must be difficult to feel that way. But I want you to know that I am clear about what will happen next. Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

Be prepared to follow up, and use friends for support and feedback. However hard this may seem, we have seen many, many marriages transform and heal because a spouse was willing to set and keep a limit by removing something his or her spouse needed.

## **7. Be "Satisfiable"**

If your spouse agrees to deal with the problem, be thankful and content that this particular goal has been reached. Let him know that if he stops doing something bad, or begins to do something good, you won't need to press for another boundary conversation on this topic.

Your spouse needs to know that you are "satisfiable." Otherwise, you run the risk of the other person becoming discouraged and giving up altogether.

Today is the day to work on your own boundaries in marriage. The issues you take initiative to deal with will affect the rest of your married life. And the issues you ignore or are afraid to address will do the same.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. When two people together take responsibility to do what is best for the marriage, love can grow. When they do not, one takes on too much responsibility and resents it while the other does not take on enough and becomes self-centered or controlling. What, if anything, do you see about yourself and/or your marriage when you look through the lens of the preceding statement?
2. Think about a current problem in your marriage. What can you do to take ownership rather than blaming your spouse? If you haven't already, state the problem in such a way as to reflect your ownership of it.
3. What issues in your marriage do you need to be dealing with? Put differently, what issues are you choosing to ignore or what are you afraid to address?

### **Prayer**

Lord God, I'm a bit nervous as I set out on this journey toward a healthier marriage, and I'm feeling more than a little vulnerable. I know that you will be with me each step of the way, and may your presence give me hope and the willingness to proceed. And, as I submit myself to your transforming touch, I ask you to be at work in my mate even as you work to make me more like Christ—in whose name I pray. Amen.

## Day 4

### Addressing Boundaries Issues with Kids

*Note: If you do not have kids, read this material with a focus on how it can benefit the children you know or your future family.*

If you are a parent, you have received a divine gift. With the gift comes a great responsibility that begins at birth and continues until your child leaves home. You are to help her develop good and mature character. We define “character” as the sum of your child’s abilities to meet the demands of life. Life has all sorts of requirements, from getting and maintaining good relationships to having self-control to developing a spiritual life. As a parent, you invest in providing those needed skills and abilities.



Boundary conversations with your child are most useful as they become internalized, that is, taken in emotionally and cognitively. When the internalization process works, the work of the parent becomes part of the makeup of the child. What was external is now internal. Over time, the child becomes a self-monitoring, self-correcting person in contrast to someone who needs constant supervision and correction from others. When the day comes that your child is faced with an invitation to take drugs, have sex outside of marriage, or cheat, you will not be around to help; however, the internalized conversations you have had over the years will be inside her and part of her and, if all goes well, will help her do the right thing.

All parents need to come to terms with this reality: One day your child will be on her own in the world. It is sad but true that your child is on the way out as you read these words. This is the goal of parenting. The parent-child relationship is unique: It is the only God-designed relationship whose goal is separation, not connection. Your child’s leaving sometimes hurts so much because your heart investment in her wants her to stay, but God has designed her to use that same investment to leave and find the way of God for herself.

How your child has internalized grace and truth from you will make a big difference in how she handles relationships, responsibilities, stress, temptations, and failure. So be sure to make boundary talks a normal part of your child’s life.

Moms and dads are often hesitant or afraid to confront their child. Some do not want their child to be unhappy. Others are easily worn down by their child’s persistence. Still others are afraid their child is too fragile, and her self-image might suffer. While you need to be concerned about how your child experiences your boundary conversations, this does not mean you should not confront. You may need to get support in how to confront well. Here are some suggestions for having face-to-face confrontations with your child:

#### **1. Take the Initiative**

Address a problem with your child right away. The longer you wait, the greater the chances he will have trouble making the important association between his actions and your talk.

His behavior diminishes in importance to him as time moves on. If the boundary conversation process goes right, in time he will catch himself without you. So, instead of waiting, you might say something like this:

*You:* "I need to talk to you about your attitude lately."

*Your child:* "I'm busy."

*You:* "I want you to finish what you were doing, but this can't wait. Let's go to the den to talk."

Keep up the initiative firmly but gently. If you think it's important enough that you need to talk right away, say so. At the same time, don't take the initiative when you are upset or likely to overreact. Make sure you are stable enough to intervene calmly. Remember that there needs to be at least one adult in the situation, and it should be you.

## **2. Stay Connected**

Be sure to reach out emotionally to your child when you correct her. Children have difficulty feeling loved while they experience truth. This is a developmental milestone for them, and good parents help them reach that goal. Even when you must be very direct, do not pull away emotionally. Hear your child out and stay connected with her feelings, as in this example:

*You:* "I understand you don't think I am being fair, and you're upset and angry, too."

*Your child:* "Well, you won't let me see my friends."

*You:* "You're right. I'm drawing the line with these three kids. I know you really like them and want to be with them."

*Your child:* "There's nothing wrong with hanging with them, and you're being so unfair."

*You:* "You're very mad at me. I understand that, and I'm sorry you feel this way. I want to talk to you about my decision, so that at least you will know why I am making it."

## **3. Go Further Than Talking**

With grownups, often the conversation is all you need. You make the person aware of the problem and state your desires and requests, and the problem is on the way to being resolved. However, children are different because they are still forming a connection between words and experiences, they may need you to go further than a talk or a warning.

As we have mentioned, be prepared to establish consequences appropriate to the situation. Many parents assume they have done their job when they have had the talk. However, help your child to understand that the talk has actions behind it.

## **4. Contain and Empathize**

Confrontation may cause your child to feel as though you don't care. Nothing you do will be able to convince her otherwise for now. This is not a time to try to prove your love with facts. It is a time to contain her protest, anger, and emotional distance from you and to empathize with her misery. If your child insists that you don't care about her, say

something like, “I really do love you, but it looks like I can’t convince you of that right now. I’m sorry you feel disconnected from me. It must be hard to feel that. But, I want to come back to the problem with your grades.”

This is hard for a parent to do. We tend to think our child will be swayed by logic and clarity. While this is true sometimes, don’t make that your agenda, especially when your child is full of strong emotions. Great healing and connecting power rests in being empathetic over and over and over again.

## **5. Remember Your Child’s Age and Maturity Level**

Gear your boundary talk to the appropriate developmental level of your child. Children go through many emotional, relational, and intellectual developmental changes. Try not to communicate on either too low or too high a level for your child to understand.

You may say to a toddler, “Don’t hit your little sister, or I will put you in time-out.” A teen may require something different: “You may not be aware of it, but it’s starting to seem like the family needs to revolve around your needs and your schedule. I want you to know that’s how we feel, and I want you to try to pay more attention to what everyone else is into.”

## **6. Normalize Protest and Anger**

When you correct your child, you take a stand against her immaturity, self-centeredness, lack of self-control, and impulsivity. You draw a line against those aspects of her character that need to grow up. This is a central aspect of all good parenting. You say no to the part of your child that thinks she is God and wants to be treated as such. Your child will find this stance unpleasant. You stand in between her and what she wants when she wants it. She will often protest, get angry, or say she hates you for confronting her. That’s part of her job: to test the limit, find that it holds, give up, and accept that life is sometimes bigger than she is.

This is how children mature. So don’t be caught off guard, surprised, or disappointed by your child’s resistance to your confrontation. Realize that things are going as they should. If your child resists, say something like this, “I know you are really angry at me right now. I understand it’s hard to lose your privileges. But no, I’m not changing my mind.”

## **7. Allow Some Withdrawal, but Not Forever**

When you confront, your child may pull away from you emotionally in anger or disappointment. Some parents have difficulty tolerating that distance. They want to feel close to their child. This can be a real problem, because the child needs some freedom to pull away from you and not like you for a while. Then, once she has emotionally resigned herself to the limit, she can return to the connection. Don’t chase her down; let her come back by herself.

At the same time, if the withdrawal does not diminish, but stays the same for a long period of time, don’t ignore it. Your child may be losing her connection with you or even getting depressed. Seek her out and insist on a talk that can help you reconnect at some level. Say something like this:



“I understand that you are mad at me for what happened. But mad is different than staying withdrawn permanently. It’s not good for us to be this disconnected. I need to find out what you’re feeling so we can work something out.”

Don’t give up on your child, even in the last years of adolescence. Use every opportunity. You are the only mom or dad they will ever have; no one in the world has the position of influence in their heart that you do.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What are some of the character strengths or weaknesses that you already see in your child?
2. What feelings do you expect to have when your child resists consequences? What will you do to enforce the consequences? Do you have someone supporting you to stay with it?
3. In what situation with your child did you carry the worry, strain, and effort, rather than letting the problem be his or hers?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, help me to understand that I am not in this parenting process alone. Remind me that you are also a parent and have gone through the same pains I am experiencing as I try to teach responsibility and love to my kids. Guide me and help my willing heart. I ask for your help and wisdom to continue the process of helping my children grow up into mature adults.

## Day 5

### Measuring Your Success with Boundaries

Building boundaries is a process that takes work and time. But, how do you know when the process is working? How do you know when you're achieving success? Use the following five steps to measure your growth and see where you are in your development.



#### 1. Acknowledge Resentment as Your Early Warning Signal

One of the first signs that you're beginning to develop boundaries is a sense of resentment, frustration, or anger at the subtle and not-so-subtle violations in your life. Just as radar signals the approach of a foreign missile, your anger can alert you to boundary violations in your life.

People who can't get angry when they are being violated, manipulated, or controlled have a genuine handicap. No "warning light" alerts them to boundary problems. This light, when functioning properly, should turn on quickly when you are being attacked.

Our inability to get angry is generally a sign that we are afraid of the separateness that comes with telling the truth. We fear that saying the truth about our unhappiness with someone will damage the relationship. But when we acknowledge that truth is always our friend, we often give ourselves permission to be angry.

So before you say anything confrontational, even before you set that first boundary, examine your heart. Ask yourself, "Do I have permission to feel angry when I'm controlled by others? Am I aware when I'm being violated? Can I hear my early-warning signal?" If so, you're on the right track. As you are better able to be honest about differences and disagreements, you will be better able to allow your anger to help you.

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Are you able to feel the anger when you've been violated, manipulated, or controlled? Do you give yourself permission to feel this early warning signal?
2. What experiences or relationships have created resentment that enabled you to see that you wanted to be treated differently?

#### 2. Practice Baby "No's"

Growth in setting emotional boundaries must always be at a rate that takes into account your past injuries. Otherwise, you could fail massively before you have solid enough boundaries. "This boundary teaching doesn't work," complained Frank. "As soon as I understood that I don't set good limits with people, I called my father the same day and gave him what for. Can you believe what he did? He hung up on me! Boundaries made things worse, instead of better."

Frank is like the overeager child who is too impatient for training wheels on his new bicycle. It's only after several falls and skinned knees later that he begins to entertain the possibility that he skipped some steps in his training.

Here's an idea to help you navigate this step. Ask your support group or some good friends if you could work on boundaries with them. They will show you their true value in their response to your truth-telling. Either they'll cheer you on in being able to disagree with and confront them, or they'll resist you. Either way, you'll learn something. Begin practicing your "no" with people who will honor it and love you for it.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. With whom can you practice saying "no"?
2. What small step can you take this week to exercise your freedom to disagree?

### **3. Rejoice in the "Guilty" Feelings**

As strange as it may seem, a sign that you're beginning to set healthy boundaries is often a sense of self-condemnation, a sense that you've transgressed some important rules in your limit setting. Many people experience intense critical self-judgment when they begin telling the truth about what is and isn't their responsibility. Why is that? Let's look at the answer in terms of slavery and freedom.

Boundary-injured individuals are slaves. They struggle to make value-based decisions on their own, but they most often reflect the wishes of those around them. And even though they can be surrounded by supportive boundary lovers, they still experience trouble setting limits.

The culprit here is a weak conscience, or an overactive harsh internal judge. Though we need our internal "evaluator" to help us know right from wrong, many people carry around an extremely self-critical — and inaccurate — conscience. They feel that they are transgressing when they aren't. Because of this overactive judge, the boundary-injured individual often has great difficulty setting limits. Questions such as, "Aren't you being too harsh?" and "How can you not attend the party? What a selfish thought!" are raised.

In a funny way, then, guilty feelings are a sign of spiritual growth. A signal that you may be protesting incorrect restraints. If the conscience were silent and providing no "how could you?" guilt-inducing messages, it might mean that you were remaining enslaved to the problem. That's why we encourage you to rejoice in the guilt. It means you are moving ahead.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. Do you wrestle with a weak conscience or an inaccurate internal judge? What type of condemning self-talk goes on in your mind?
2. In what boundary setting will you feel like you are transgressing when you aren't?

#### **4. Practice Grownup “No’s”**

Think for a minute about this question: Who is your number-one “boundary buster”? Who is the foremost person in your life with whom it’s difficult to set limits? More than one person may come to mind. This step deals with those extremely complicated, conflictual, frightening relationships. Straightening out these relationships is a major goal in becoming a boundaried person. Setting important limits with significant people is the fruit of much work and maturing.

It’s important not to confuse our goals here. Often, people who have been boundary injured think that the objective is to set limits on those important areas, and get life stabilized again. They may be living for the day when “I can tell Mom no.” Or when “I can set limits on my husband’s drinking.” While these sorts of confrontations are very important, they aren’t the ultimate target of learning boundaries.

Our real target is maturity — the ability to love successfully and work successfully, the way God does. Boundary setting is a large part of maturing. We can’t really love until we have boundaries — otherwise we love out of compliance or guilt. And we can’t really be productive at work without boundaries; otherwise we’re so busy following others’ agendas that we’re doubleminded and unstable. The goal is to have a character structure that has boundaries and that can set limits on self and others at the appropriate times.

#### **Questions for Reflection**

1. Who represents the biggest “boundary busters” in your life? What issues are being violated in your relationship with these individuals? What specific boundaries do you need to set?
2. As always, be sure you aren’t taking steps toward building boundaries alone. Who will support you as you take this critical step?

#### **5. Free Your “No” and “Yes”**

Think for a second about the last time you were asked for something you weren’t sure you had anything left over to give. You weren’t sure you could do it with a cheerful heart. What happened next is what this particular boundary yardstick is all about. You probably did one of two things:

- Since you were unsure, you said “yes.”
- Since you were unsure, you said “no.”

Which of these responses is the more mature answer? In most cases, the second answer of saying “no.” Why? It is more responsible to give out of our resources than to promise that which we might not be able to deliver. Boundary-injured individuals make promises and then do one of two things: (1) They make good but feel resentful, or (2) they fail on the promise. Boundary-developed people, however, make good freely and gladly. Or they don’t promise at all.

Following up on guilt-ridden or compliant responsibilities can be quite costly, painful, and inconvenient. The lesson you need to learn is not to promise too much before you have done your spiritual and emotional calculations first.

### Questions for Reflection

1. What do you plan to do the next time someone asks you for something that you aren't sure you can give?
2. Do you tend to feel worn-out, in a hurry, or out of control? Or, do you feel as if you're making steady progress towards a goal? How do your boundaries, or the lack of them, contribute to the overall state of your life?

### Prayer

God, you know where I am on this journey toward healthy boundaries. You know the steps I've taken and which lie ahead. I thank you for the anger you built into me to warn me of boundary violations. Teach me to pay attention to those internal signals. Thank you for your love and for the worth I can find in you.

Give me the courage to practice baby no's, and give me wisdom as I choose people to practice with. Give me the courage to confront the boundary-busters in my life with grown-up no's.

Teach me to love others as myself and to respect their boundaries the way I want them to respect mine. And when I see an opportunity to give, teach me to freely say yes or no.

It is my prayer that you will continue to help me learn to take ownership of my life, to teach me to see what is my responsibility and what isn't, to show me what problems I've taken on that you never intended for me, and to guide me as I try to establish and live by biblical boundaries. May I live a life of love, freedom, responsibility, and service to your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you for taking the **Boundaries Builder 5-Day Challenge**. Don't stop now! This is just the beginning. You're in a great position to start building healthy boundaries in your most important relationships. Learn everything you need to know from Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend by getting a copy of *Boundaries*, *Boundaries in Marriage*, and *Boundaries with Kids*, courtesy of Zondervan Publishers. All rights reserved. Purchase these books today at: [www.BoundariesBooks.com](http://www.BoundariesBooks.com)

