



ASK THE  
CHRISTIAN  
COUNSELOR



# DO I NEED BOUNDARIES?

SEEKING TO PLEASE GOD  
BY LEARNING TO SAY NO

JIM NEWHEISER



“Jim Newheiser offers a wise, biblically balanced contribution to the discussion of boundaries in Christian circles and the counseling world. He affirms appropriate scriptural limits while challenging the contemporary self-centered misuse of the concept. Most especially, Dr. Newheiser calls believers to sacrificial love—even when such Christlike love means going beyond what culture or comfort deems reasonable.”

**Keith A. Evans**, Associate Professor of Christian Counseling, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“Jim Newheiser has written an excellent book that helps us set boundaries biblically in all kinds of situations. I highly recommend this book for you and those you love.”

**Charles D. Hodges Jr.**, Family Physician; instructor/counselor, Faith Biblical Counseling; editor of *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*

“In his biblical, practical, and penetrating style, Jim Newheiser unpacks the cultural baggage around boundaries, sorts it out with God's truth, and then calls us to operate within scriptural categories bearing more resilient results. Any Christian who needs to draw clear lines in hard places will be grateful they were guided by this book!”

**Dave Harvey**, President, Great Commission Collective; author of *The Clay Pot Conspiracy*

“This book is long overdue and much needed. With theological precision and exegetical expertise, Dr. Jim Newheiser draws on decades of counseling experience to clearly address what the Bible really says about creating boundaries in personal relationships. I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants biblical boundaries.”

**John D. Street Jr.**, Distinguished Lecturer and Research Fellow in Biblical Counseling, The Master's University & Seminary; president, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC)

*“Do I Need Boundaries?”* is an engaging and timely book, answering many questions you might have about the topic from God’s perspective. Dr. Newheiser differentiates between what is biblical and what is not. He explains clearly how we should think about this issue and how to respond. He also includes several case studies with thought-provoking questions. I highly recommend this resource!”

**Martha Peace**, Author of *The Excellent Wife*;  
biblical counselor

“Relationships are wonderful, important, and complex. This is why the Bible spends so much space describing them and explaining how to navigate the challenges they pose. Jim Newheiser serves as a reliable guide to all of us who need to grow in biblical wisdom about these wonderfully complicated things we call relationships. As you read, you will encounter the teaching of a man who is marked by biblical wisdom and a desire to help you. You need to read this helpful little book.”

**Heath Lambert**, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church,  
Jacksonville, Florida

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# CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Thinking Like a Christian About Boundaries .....	1
Chapter 2. Biblical Principles for Setting Boundaries .....	11
Chapter 3. Applying Biblical Principles: A Job Without Boundaries .....	31
Chapter 4. Applying Biblical Principles: A Child Who Comes Out as Gay or Transgender .....	38
Chapter 5. Applying Biblical Principles: A Single Girl Who Hopes for a Ring by Spring .....	43
Chapter 6. Applying Biblical Principles: In-Laws Who Act Like Outlaws .....	48
Chapter 7. Applying Biblical Principles: Sexual Boundaries in Marriage .....	54
Chapter 8. Applying Biblical Principles: Dealing with Past Abuse .....	60
Chapter 9. Applying Biblical Principles: Financial Boundaries .....	63
Chapter 10. Applying Biblical Principles: Failure to Launch .....	70

Chapter 11. Applying Biblical Principles: Addicted to Screens.....	73
Conclusion .....	76
Appendix. A Biblical Perspective on Cloud and Townsend's Treatment of Boundaries.....	79
Endnotes .....	88

# Chapter 1

## THINKING LIKE A CHRISTIAN ABOUT BOUNDARIES

In the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Ok!lahoma!*, a young woman, Ado Annie, laments in song that she is “the girl who can’t say no.”<sup>1</sup> There are many people today who can identify with Ado Annie because they find that they just can’t say no to people who make inappropriate or excessive demands upon them.

Some of us have unreasonable employers who expect us to unnecessarily work long hours. Many of us deal with family members who expect us to be on call at all times, even at the last minute or if other plans have been made. Others have relatives who insist that we give financial help when asked. Perhaps we have friends and neighbors who expect help with babysitting or household projects but never offer to reciprocate. Even church leaders can burden overcommitted people, often compounding the guilt as they remind us that we are all doing it for the Lord. We all have a list of overwhelming demands that have been made on our time, money, and emotional resources.

It’s true that the inability to say no can cause problems. As a wise friend stated, “When you say yes to one demand,



you are saying no to others.” Giving in to the tyranny of the urgent can lead to neglecting your most important God-given responsibilities. Some find themselves exhausted and overwhelmed by overcommitment. They become bitter and angry toward those who take advantage of them.

## **WHY PEOPLE SET BOUNDARIES**

One proposed solution to this problem has been the concept of creating personal boundaries. This approach has been popular among psychologists and self-help gurus since the 1980s. People are encouraged to set limits on relationships for the sake of those individuals’ own well-being. The metaphor of boundaries has become so common in popular culture that people who have never read a book about boundaries or talked to a therapist have embraced the concept and will speak of setting relationship boundaries for self-protection. You often hear people say, “I’m always doing things for others. I need to set boundaries so that I can take care of myself. I need more me time.”

Although the concept of creating personal boundaries has been around for decades, the metaphor has taken on new life in our polarized culture. You may find yourself placed outside of the boundaries others have set. Individuals who make a politically (or theologically) disfavored statement on social media are often completely and permanently cut off by former friends. This behavior is now known as *canceled* people.

Tragically, families are dividing. Some young adults are convinced that they have been harmed or even traumatized by the allegedly abusive way that their parents raised them. This is not meant to diminish the terrible and very real effects of abusive parenting, but many of the abuses

cited are parenting choices like expecting church attendance, enforcing curfews, and overseeing social media use. Some adult children have set strict limits on their interactions with their parents, rarely seeing them or even rarely talking or texting with them. Many have identified their parents as “toxic” and have totally cut off all contact with them. A national survey estimates that approximately 30 percent of Americans aged eighteen and older have cut off a family member.<sup>2</sup>

For over forty years, I have had the privilege of counseling individuals and families through many relational challenges. While it is sometimes appropriate or even necessary to say no, I am concerned that the concept of setting boundaries is being misused. In contrast, Scripture offers infallible wisdom to help us to honor God as we navigate the challenges of setting appropriate limits (boundaries) in relationships and responding to the boundaries that others set around themselves.

## **HOW THE BIBLE TALKS ABOUT BOUNDARIES**

While therapists often use “boundaries” in a metaphorical sense for setting limits on relationships, in the Bible, boundaries are usually literal physical borders between political entities (Numbers 35:26–28, 32; Joshua 13:23, 27; 15:1–2; Judges 2:9; Proverbs 15:25; Ezekiel 45:1–7; Acts 17:26; etc.). There are times in Scripture where physical boundaries or limitations have spiritual implications. The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was off-limits for the first man and woman (Genesis 2:17), and there were dire consequences for the violation of that “boundary.”

Throughout the Bible we are called to set limits (or boundaries) on our behavior. God’s law, including the

Ten Commandments, puts sins such as disrespect of parents, murder, adultery, stealing, and lying off-limits. Children need limits or both they and their parents will suffer (Proverbs 29:15).

In the Bible, boundaries distinguish one thing from another—one person's land from someone else's, sin from righteousness, the holy from the unholy, the permissible from the impermissible, Christians from unbelievers. Boundaries are a necessary fact of life; we can't live without them. All people, everywhere, have boundaries. How we differ is in where we draw the boundaries. God's boundaries are always good, and transgressing them comes with consequences.

This quick look at what Scripture says about boundaries might seem pretty far removed from how we use the term in contemporary culture. But the issues that "boundary setting" deals with are addressed all through the Bible. God has much to say about how we relate to others, whether we should say no or yes, and how we should use our time. Sadly, much of the discussion on "setting boundaries" in personal relationships centers on what's best for the person who is setting the boundary. But Christians have a different starting point. Their goal is to live a life pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:8–10). Starting there will give you clear directions on difficult relationships and difficult decisions.

## **PLEASING GOD, NOT PEOPLE, GIVES DIRECTIONS ON SETTING BOUNDARIES**

The most important thing to remember is that the solution to these problems is not going from pleasing others (Galatians 1:10) to pleasing yourself (2 Timothy 3:2). Instead, our great aim should be to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9).

## **CAN ALL (OR EVEN MOST) RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS BE SOLVED BY SETTING APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES?**

If you read popular books on boundaries, like *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*, by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend,<sup>3</sup> you will notice that they teach that most interpersonal problems and conflicts would be solved by setting the right relational boundaries. Cloud and Townsend begin their book with a description of a day in the boundaryless life of Sherrie. She is overwhelmed by the demands and expectations of others, including her children's school, her needy mother, her irresponsible coworkers, her unreasonable boss, her selfish friends, her unhelpful children, her unsupportive husband, and even her insensitive church leaders. She lives in fear of disappointing others. She is exhausted, tempted to bitterness, and worried that important relationships are falling apart.

The book concludes with a day in Sherrie's new, better life, in which her boundaries have been firmly established according to the principles advocated by the authors. Sherrie wisely and appropriately handles every inappropriate imposition. She has a support group. Her family members are pulling their own weight. She is in a church which respects boundaries. She no longer does tasks for her irresponsible coworkers, and she has even received a job promotion from her employer. Her husband is no longer grumpy, and her marriage has greatly improved. People are no longer taking advantage of her. All is well.

At first glance, it might seem that this book is positive—we would all like a simple, easy-to-follow solution to problems and conflict with others. But while Cloud and

Townsend do well at describing the problem, they fall short of biblical standards in their interpretation of the problem and in establishing a biblical, gospel-centered solution (see the appendix on p. 79 for an in-depth review of their book).

The popular discussions of boundary setting promise that our problems, too, will be solved by setting proper boundaries. But Scripture teaches that our problems are deeper than our relationships and that the solutions are more complex than merely establishing relational limits. While relationships take wisdom, our deepest problem is that “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.” And Jesus provides the solution to our wayward hearts: “and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). When we turn from our own ways and to Jesus in faith, then he gives us his Spirit to counsel, comfort, convict, and guide (John 14:26; 16:8–14).

### **DON'T REPLACE THE GOAL OF PLEASING OTHERS WITH THE GOAL OF PLEASING YOURSELF**

The usual advice given about boundaries focuses on how we will benefit by requiring others to respect our limits. This approach to setting boundaries can lead people to replace their goal of pleasing others with a new goal of pleasing themselves. Scripture teaches that our most important relationship is with God and that we should embrace his control of every aspect of our lives, including our relationships, as our chief aim is not to protect and please ourselves but instead to please him: “‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God” (James 4:6–7).

This unbiblical approach to our relational problems encourages us to think we can solve our own problems. But it isn't that simple. Sin affects both our relationships with God and our relationships with one another. We can't fix our relationships by our efforts or imposing our morality on others. We all need the gospel of Christ. Christ is the one who died not only to reconcile us with God but also to help us be graciously reconciled to one another (Ephesians 4:31–5:2).

While Cloud, Townsend, and others like them address a real problem (that people who can't say no can become overcommitted and overwhelmed), their interpretation of the problem is flawed, and their proposed solution is inadequate. As we shall see, there is a better way.

### **A DEEPER (AND BIBLICAL) LOOK AT OUR MOTIVATION FOR SAYING YES OR NO**

What are the inward heart motivations of overcommitted, overwhelmed people? Why do we allow others to control us and use us? The Bible gives us insight into the root of the problem when it says, "The fear of man lays a snare" (Proverbs 29:25a).

What is happening in our hearts when we are constantly saying yes to the demands that others make? Ed Welch comments on the effect of following the modern teachings on boundary setting when he writes,

The other-oriented command to love is revised so that it becomes a self-oriented goal to never disappoint, to always have people pleased with you, to never have conflict . . . Is the emphasis on loving another person or is it on being loved by another



person? . . . The goal of followers of Christ is to love others more than need love from others. Does being loved by this person become the center of your life, replacing God Himself?<sup>4</sup>

Remember that when we say yes to one demand, we are by implication saying no to other demands. Being a people pleaser means we are more concerned about saying yes to demanding people so that they approve of us than saying yes to God and doing what pleases him. Putting anything (including other people) ahead of God means that we are not worshipping and loving God. The Bible calls this idolatry—and the consequences of idolatry hurt us and others.

The Bible says that people pleasers are caught like an animal in a trap—“The fear of man lays a snare” (Proverbs 29:25). Jeremiah 17:5–6 describes those who make other people more important than God as being under a curse:

Thus says the LORD: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.”

Have you noticed that when we make it our aim to please others, we often feel dry, like a dying bush in a dry desert?

## **HOW CAN WE SET APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES?**

The solution proposed by many psychologists to the problem of boundary violations is to “take control of your life.”

The result is that those who have been overwhelmed by the expectations of other people often go from making other people the center of their lives to making themselves the center of their lives. But moving from pleasing others to pleasing self will not solve the problem.

When you think about the problem of saying no in your life, isn't it freeing to flip the script from choosing to either please others or please yourself to choosing to please God? Replacing wanting to make others happy with wanting to make ourselves happy is not the way to the blessed life. Instead, following Jesus and living for him will give us freedom in our relationships—even when we have disappointed people. This is what it means to be a Christian. Paul puts it like this: “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10).

The “take control of your life” solution does not address the heart issues that make us susceptible to having our lives controlled by the demands of others, nor does it help us live in a way that pleases and honors God. Those who struggle with boundaries due to underlying issues like bad theology (*God will only love me if I treat others perfectly*), scriptural abuse (when others twist Scripture to make us do what they want), lack of reflection (thinking, *I'm just too busy to think about why I'm always saying yes*), or other faulty functional beliefs will not have the opportunity to identify these underlying issues.

The Bible offers the God-centered alternative. We repent of pleasing others, and we devote ourselves to pleasing God in all things—including our relationships and the demands they make. Proverbs 29:25 tells us how we can

escape the snare set by the fear of man: “But whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.” Instead of worrying about what others think of us, we set our focus on following God’s ways.

The antidote to the dryness experienced by those who make people too important is that they should grow in trusting the Lord; then they will flourish:

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:7–8)

Trust in the Lord is not merely a feeling. When we are convinced that he is good and that his ways are best, we actively seek to please and obey him, so we flourish. This does not mean that life will always be trouble-free, but even hardship, or what Jesus calls “pruning” (John 15:2), is for our good (Romans 8:28).

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does the concept of boundaries in the Bible differ from how psychologists speak of boundaries?
2. Given that the Bible uses the word *boundaries* in a literal sense, is there any risk to claiming biblical warrant for using the term metaphorically?
3. What are some of the reasons you struggle to set reasonable boundaries?