

Family Life Boosters (3) – Set Boundaries

We set boundaries to protect what is important in our lives and avoid the stress that comes from collapsed boundaries and enmeshment. Children feel secure when they have boundaries. Our goal is to have healthy boundaries. Boundaries keep the bad things out and the good things in. Lori Radun said *“Boundaries are essential to helping us identify who we are, what's important to us and how we want to live our lives. Without them, other people will decide these things for us.”* The challenge is the tension between being a collective unit with common values whilst still trying to celebrate differentiation and individuality. In this message I highlight different types of boundaries to be set and respected in the family setting. Our goal is to develop healthy boundaries as opposed to collapsed ones or rigid ones.

We need to be careful not to put burdens on people where Christ has not done so. Many people do not know how to shift roles by being relationally agile. They are the boss at work, first born in the family and generally have become a chronic bully. They mother or father their spouse. It's easier for them to stay in that same role. In collectivist cultures we tend to make decisions based on fear of banishment from the in-group as opposed to individual conscience. We see this manifesting in career choices. However, scripture encourages us to instruct a child in the way he should go not in the way everyone from his tribe is going. Often we feel pain that we cannot articulate yet often such pain is linked to the violation of boundaries. When we can label it as this, we find that we get closer to addressing the real issue and finding freedom and closure. Join us on this journey as we explore the major types of boundaries.

Why do we violate each other's boundaries in family settings?

1. The boundaries are not clear in the first place, usually because of lack of assertiveness.
2. We project our preferences onto our spouse and children.
3. We grew up in enmeshed families where boundaries were collapsed and continuously violated.
4. We feel the need to rescue our spouse.
5. We feel that the end justifies the means.
6. We justify this unhealthy behaviour as we think we are helping them.
7. We treat everyone around us as if they are kids.

Major Types of Boundaries

1. Space Boundaries

It is important to create and maintain the climate you want in your space. This can be your car, bedroom, bathroom etc. Are you clear about your standards of neatness and ambiance? Do you assert these or do you allow others to contaminate it? For example we see that when Peter was raising the dead he asserted space boundaries.

Acts 9:36-41

³⁶*In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.* ³⁷*About that time she became ill and died, and her*

body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. ³⁸Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, 'Please come at once!'

³⁹Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood round him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. ⁴⁰Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning towards the dead woman, he said, 'Tabitha, get up.' She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.

When Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple, He was asserting a space boundary. When my kids are talking loudly in lounge I often assert a space boundary. When I am conversing with my wife about negative matters to do with other people we sometimes assert space boundaries by saying, "We don't want their stuff to get into our space." Angels are attracted to certain spaces. Watch the climate of the space. What music and movies do you allow in your space? Would you let those people visit you and do the same? Would you let someone come to your house and stage a play doing that?

2. Task and Energy Boundaries

Matthew 14:13

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

Some teachers do this when they have FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) on behalf of the student. It reminds of someone in my workshop recently who loves teaching but covers all the topics beyond what is needed. I described this as a task and energy boundary.

Are you able to say, *"I am tired now, we can continue later."*

This revolves around learning to set limits. *"If you are not at the car park by 1.30pm, I will need to leave to fetch your sister."*

This is a useful boundary when you have a spouse who loves to entertain. You can say, "Thanks guys, feel free to carry on, I am going to bed as I have an early start tomorrow."

This also occurs when you are visiting people and agree before-hand as a family how long you will spend there. *"Honey, I am happy to go, but let's only stay there for an hour."*

"I have had my play time with you, Mummy now needs to do some work."

Setting limits is also a way of avoiding being bullied into premature decision making. "No, I need time to think about this".

When is it time to stop? What is draining you and how is it impacting others? How many hours a week can you work? A lot of people are workaholics and they don't know when to stop. Someone told me recently about how they had a boss who would call them at 2am stating that he could do so because his subordinate had a company phone.

I am often amazed by how we don't respect appointments that we make with ourselves, yet we respect appointments that we make with others. Many people stay on at a function for many hours until one person plucks up the courage to leave.

3. Minimum and maximum boundaries

Do you have a minimum amount of prayer that you expect of yourself?

Mt 26:40

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter.

Do you have a maximum number of times for forgiveness or for giving people another chance?

Mt 18:21-22

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

It is important to think through minimum/maximum boundaries when it comes to church attendance, pocket money, how many kiddies parties your children attend, dates with spouse, consultation with regards to finances etc. Do you have minimum/maximum boundaries with regards to exercise, food, etc.

Minimum/Maximum boundaries include Time Boundaries (What is the maximum amount of time you will spend at a function, or watching TV, or socializing?) and Money boundaries (Limits to my spending before consultation, birthday presents – expensive present may mean no party).

4. Moral Boundaries

Do you have clear moral positions? Have you pre-decided what these are, lest you fall?

It is problematic if you and your spouse have different standards with regards to adultery then you will have problems. For example, one of you has the Bible standard of avoiding the appearance of evil and fleeing from emotional affairs whilst the other is quite happy flirting. Some moral boundaries are to do with relational and social boundaries. In scripture there are many forbidden alliances.

2 Cor 6:14

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

A lot of family struggles are to do with the unwillingness to redefine certain friendships.

5. Psychological Boundaries

Jesus guarded His heart for He knew what was in theirs.

John 2:23-25

²³Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. ²⁴But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, ²⁵and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

This is also important when counselling people. It is a form of healthy detachment. Allow them to decide for themselves. Your job is to tell them possible consequences of their decisions. Again this is a boundary. This also manifests as self-respect boundaries. These are boundaries you erect in order to establish psychological safety.

"I won't stay in an environment where people speak to me like that." This is a common phenomenon when people feel under pressure to eat lunch with their team members at work. This type of boundary, when pre-decided will help you to stay out of toxic relationships. You are clear of what the deal breakers are. You are able to walk out on bullies.

"I will only continue this conversation if you engage with me respectfully."

6. Health and Body Boundaries

We are called to be good stewards of our bodies with regards to our health and what we use our bodies for. Health boundaries help you to determine food and drink intake. What do you eat and how much?

Phil 3:19

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

With regards to your body, what do you permit people to see? What is private? This needs to be taught. When it is clear it will protect children from abuse; they need to know what is appropriate to touch and what is not. There are grey areas even for parents. Some men experience this tension of not knowing and then play it safe by distancing themselves physically from their daughters. There are other cases of mothers losing their dignity by using the toilet in front of their children. I know that some people are relaxed about these things and different families have different practices. Some families walk around in their underwear when there are no visitors. I know a lady who has baths whilst chatting to her sons. It is important to think through these boundaries. Look how Noah's sons dealt with his nakedness.

Gen 9:20-23

²⁰Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. ²¹When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. ²²Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. ²³But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backwards and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked.

Isolation when one was sick was something that was taught in Hebrew culture and religion. This is a type of health and body boundary.

Lev 13:4-5

⁴If the shiny spot on the skin is white but does not appear to be more than skin deep and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest is to isolate the affected person for seven days.

⁵On the seventh day the priest is to examine them, and if he sees that the sore is unchanged and has not spread in the skin, he is to isolate them for another seven days.

7. Information boundaries

What is over share? What is between you and your spouse? Be careful discussing issues such as income specifics as your kids can talk to other people without being aware of the implications. Our children have told us interesting things about other kids' parents. Perhaps there are things you only share with your children when it is age appropriate to do so.

Jesus had an inner circle with which He shared certain information

John 15:15

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

People tend to demand rights to information and privileges because they are family but this should not always be the case. Are you in a family where everyone is in everyone's business? There are no secrets?

Mt 12:46-50

⁴⁶*While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

Be careful when people say things like, "I am your sister, I should know, tell me now." Do they have a good track record? Can you trust them with the information? Are they mature enough to handle it? My kids often pressure me to give them information. In this passage Jesus was showing that He was not nepotistic when it came to His ministry.

God does not confide in everyone

Ps 25:14

The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.

Mark 4:34

He did not say anything to them without using a parable But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

8. Identity boundaries (This is what I like; not my kids, hubby and siblings, but me).

Differentiation is one of the qualities of a functional family. It is seen in your ability to express your attributes and preferences. God has wired us differently. Do you know where you end and the next person begins? Are you aware of your personal attributes and preferences?

People have different expressions of their spirituality and this should be respected. In enmeshed families there is often a rigid approach to spirituality where everyone has to pray the same way and there is no room for individuality. Coming from collectivist cultures many people on the African continent chose professions that were endorsed by the collective instead of basing their choices on individuality.

Allow people to have their own convictions. The important thing is that God is glorified.

Romans 14:5-6

⁵One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

9. Role and Assignment Boundaries

2 Cor 10:13-16

¹³We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you. ¹⁴We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. ¹⁵Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, ¹⁶so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in someone else's territory.

It is important to know your sphere of influence and spiritual jurisdiction. If not, you may end up trespassing in the spirit and dabbling at levels that God has not graced your for.

It is important to have role clarity in the home. If this does not occur you can end up having children counselling their parents prematurely and other types of role reversal. Remember that they are your children first before they are your friends.

Luke 2:48-50

⁴⁸When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Not everyone will understand the boundaries associated with your assignment.

When they do understand your assignment, they are sometimes too eager to see you fulfil it.

John 2:1-5

¹On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ²and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." ⁴"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Jesus had to exercise strong boundaries when His disciples tried to turn Him from His assignment.

Mt 16:22-23

²²Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" ²³Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Responsibility boundaries in the home are linked to roles and assignments. It is important to know where your responsibility ends. To what extent can you help them with their homework? How much help is too much? It is not always your fault if your kids fail in class. They also make their own choices. We know this in counselling too. I present options and highlight consequences. If I tell people what to do, they could turn around and blame me when they make a decision. It is their decision. If you give someone a prophetic word it is for them to implement, not you. Part of Responsibility boundaries is responsibility for choices. What can your kids choose? Subjects, sport. How much can you impose based on experience? Are any of these decisions age specific?

"I can bring the book you left behind but only later when I am driving that way."

What are some common boundary violations in marriage and family life?

1. Forcing your spouse to dress a certain way.
2. Choosing your spouse's career.
3. Controlling your spouse's preference with regards entertainment (music etc).
4. Making decisions on behalf of your spouse.
5. Invading your spouse's personal space when they need it.
6. Continuing with bad habits that affect your spouse (e.g. loud music, swearing etc)

Boundaries scripts in family settings

Example 1

I feel my boundaries are violated when you tell the kids to come to the shops with me.

I would prefer you to tell them to ask me if I would like to take them or not.

Example 2

I feel my boundaries are violated when you answer questions I have asked the kids before they have had a chance to respond to me.

I would prefer you to wait for them to answer me first before attempting to respond on their behalf.

Example 3

I feel my boundaries are violated when you take over a task I am doing without asking me.

I would prefer you to first ask me whether I would like your help instead of assuming that you know.

Example 4

I feel my boundaries are violated when you hear me singing a song softly to myself but then join in loudly with a different song that it reminds you of.

I would prefer you to join me singing the same song and at the same volume.

Example 5

I feel my boundaries are violated when you update people on developments close to my heart when I am present to do so myself.

I would prefer you to let me say those things for myself and you can add anything I have left out.