**Boundaries and Consequences**

**Prodigal Message 17**

**Weekly Scripture memory verse:**

**Galatians 6:7 God cannot be mocked. A man must reap what he sows.**

*Ginny and I discussed certain things we would never allow with our kids. When we discussed these “rules” with our kids we were not even aware of the term “boundaries”. However that is exactly what these rules were. They were boundaries that defined what we would allow and what we would not allow. We were firm in our resolve and told them as much in our discussion. One of those boundaries was a promise that if they were ever caught drinking and driving, we would sell their vehicle. One night, years later, my son called me for help near our home, where he had pulled over with a flat tire. I went to help him and smelled alcohol on his breath. Remembering our “rule” clearly, I continued to wrestle in my mind with my next step, as I finished helping him change the tire. I thought about the disruption, conflict and inconvenience that would occur with following through with selling his truck. I thought of us becoming chauffeurs for a 17 year old for the foreseeable future and the financial loss associated with the move. So I made my decision and once we were both inside the truck, I told him we had something to discuss before we headed home. I told him I knew he had been drinking and reminded him of our deal. Then I said that I loved him and because it would “kill his mother”, I wanted to consider the seriousness of his crime and to never do it again. I was going to give him one more chance, but the next time would be different. We were not going to tell mom, as it would worry her.The “next time” I would sell his car. In that moment, I had thought of everything, but the most important things. I did the easiest thing in the moment and what was most convenient for me. I forgot my purpose, my witness, and what was actually the most loving, best thing for my son.*

**Defining Boundaries**

Boundaries can be physical or personal. Physical boundaries are often extremely helpful for your protection and enjoyment. For example, road bumps along the highway help you to stay in the proper lane and warn you of danger when you veer toward trouble. Fences often prevent you from wandering from safety into dangerous areas.

Can you imagine playing a football or baseball game without boundaries? What enjoyment is there when out of bounds is ill defined, every touchdown is disputed, and every field goal or home run is subjective? The result is utter chaos and frustration.

In the same way, when we do not set personal boundaries of what we will and will not allow and we do not define what we will and will not be responsible for, the same chaos and frustration will be found. *A family without rules and regulations (boundaries) is a family of disorder and chaos.*

**What is the Purpose of Boundaries? Are Boundaries for Us or for Others?**

The purpose of boundaries are often misunderstood. Boundaries are primarily about **us**. Our boundaries let the world know what we are responsible for and what we are not responsible for. If enforced strictly and consistently, they promote peace, physical and mental well being, and fruitfulness on the part of an individual. From a Biblical perspective, boundaries allow us to live the life God has marked out for us. (Hebrews 12:1; Ephesians 2:10) Proper Biblical boundaries allows us to say no to things that are not of God, so that we can be available to God and the race he has for us to run.

However, boundaries can also have secondary gain for the people impacted by them. For example they can be used to parent our children during certain stages of their maturity. Proper parenting not only uses boundaries to teach discipline and character development, but also teaches our children to set healthy boundaries for themselves.

At one extreme, we are TOTALLY responsible FOR infants and toddlers. We need to enforce boundaries to protect them and keep them safe. They must not run into the street or be allowed to crawl into the fireplace. At the other extreme, we are not responsible, in any way, FOR our adult children who are able and capable of providing for themselves.

At some point, usually in late teens, we must move from using our boundaries for their benefit to using them for a dual purpose. We must use them for our benefit and secondarily for their discipline and character building.. At this point, any discipline and character development is shifted from our responsibility to God’s, exactly where it should be. It is critical to keep the purpose of boundary setting in clear view.

*In the story above, one could assume that such a boundary was to teach my son, responsibility, discipline, and simply to not drink and drive. There is no doubt this is true, but such a boundary was for me as well, as it would have helped to create more order and clarity in my life. My bad decision led to more rule breaking and greater chaos in everyone’s life, as my son predictably began to challenge ALL of my rules and boundaries. I should not fail to mention the marital disharmony caused by me not enforcing our mutual agreement on the vehicle and not leading myself my wife or my family well.*

**How Do We Set Good Boundaries**

We must have a keen awareness of what we are responsible for. Setting proper boundaries takes much thought and wise counsel. Although a full discussion is beyond the scope of this writing, a summary will be helpful.

* **Feelings:** We must own our own feelings or emotions. How we react emotionally is our own choice and if we are honest about our feeling it will point us to an underlying issue that we can then address.
* **Behaviors:** We are responsible for our own behaviors. This point is worth expanding. Behaviors have consequences and this is explained clearly in Galatians6:7. *Do not be deceived; God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature, will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.* **You cannot teach responsibility without teaching that you reap what you sow. When parents interfere with the Law of Reaping and Sowing , they play God and disable the vital feedback loop of pain and hardship associated with destructive, bad decisions.**

So how can we know when and if we are to help or not to help our prodigals? Other verses in Galatians guide us. Gal 6:2 states the we are to carry each other’s *burdens* but 6:5 says each one should carry their own *load*. This seems contradictory or confusing at first glance? However, the original Greek used in Gal 6:2 for burden is *baros,* which is a heavy, crushing load which one person could not possibly lift alone. The Greek for load in Gal 6:5 is *Phortion* with is a small load that an individual would be expected to carry, maybe in a backpack. So how do we determine what behaviors are enabling and destructive as opposed to those that are truly helpful ? Answers can be found in God’s word, processed with experienced, wise Biblical community. Prodigal closed groups and leadership are happy to help process these issues with you as you participate in this ministry. We will give direction, but not directions,, as you alone are ultimately responsible for your final choices.

There is no doubt that some of our prodigals have challenges that limit their capabilities at times, such as psychological disorders or low IQ’s, but experience would indicate that in the majority of instances, parents or spouses of Prodigals underestimate what their prodigals can carry in their backpack. Our prodigals are often capable of doing much more than we believe they can. Community proves invaluable in sorting these issues out.

* **Choices** : We must own our own choices. Anytime you say, “they made me”, or “I had to” you are owning a misconception that someone else is responsible for your actions. We are responsible for our own choices.
* **Beliefs and Values**: We often do not view our belief system as a potential source of our problems, but they could be. We can believe anything we want, but if it is not true, it will fail us in the end. Unfortunately, it usually fails us when we need it most. In the first few weeks of this ministry you are asked to determine and write out your Personal Mission Statement (PMS), which defines your **purpose** in life. Your purpose is defined by your belief system. If your purpose is Biblically based, then God has value above all else and your boundaries will be directed by that paradigm. If you value anything above God or even don’t believe in God then your choices and boundaries look much different. For example if you place your child above God, then having them “like” you and saving them from pain prioritize your life and decisions. In this situation you will have very soft or even non-existent boundaries, as your prodigal’s manipulation will easily cause them to blur or even vanish. If, however, you prioritize God above everything including your self and your prodigal, then you will prioritize glorifying God by trusting Him and His Word to guide you in every decision. You chose obedience and trust over fleeting, temporal, personal happiness and pleasure for both you and your children/prodigals. Such boundaries promote personal peace and joy, as well as raising a responsible, Godly child.
* **Limits:** Boundaries are commonly set in order to force others to act in a certain way. The problem is that we cant do that! What we can do is control our exposure to people who are behaving poorly. We cannot control the behavior of others. Our model is God. He does not really “set limits” on people to “make them” behave. God sets standards primarily to show the Holiness of His character. He then gives people the right to choose freely. That is loving. Our rebellion separates ourselves from God who remains unmoved. He states, in effect, “ You can be that way if you choose, but you cannot come into my house.” *Heaven is a place for the repentant and all are welcome.*

Cloud and Townsend*, Boundaries*

I would humbly add a slight emphasis to that of Cloud and Townsend. God never moves away from us. We move away from Him in our choices. We all agree that God is eager for us to return “home”. The choice is ours in accepting God’s boundaries that He communicates clearly through His Word. He clearly tells us what he likes and what he dislikes. He tells us what He will allow and will not allow. He tells us what He is responsible for, what He thinks, and what He loves. He confronts sin and sets boundaries for us that will keep us from it. However when we do sin, He loves us enough to allow us to suffer consequences for it, which is always for our own good and benefit.

It is up to us to follow God’s model and set appropriate, clear and unmoving boundaries. As lovers of our prodigals, we then stand firm on God’s word, leaving free choice to our prodigals, allowing them to suffer the consequences of those choices.

**Hebrews 12:5-8** *My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline nor lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his earthly father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*

**Additional Boundary “Pearls” or Special Circumstances**

* Cloud and Townsend point out in *Boundaries* thatas we are raising our young, immature **children** by setting appropriate boundaries for them, we must give them opportunities to say “no” and be respected. This allows them to develop their own boundaries in order to feel safe and respected. They cannot do anything they like, but we must not withdraw or become angry at their “no”. We must let them know that they are just as loved when saying no as when saying yes. Our love is just like God’s, unconditional. However our “no” still stands, is in their best interest, and will have consequences if disobeyed. We cannot have a lack of limits, but yet we should not over control. We must keep them safe but give them room to make mistakes and learn from those experiences. Hebrews 5:14 states that we learn from “use”. *Solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*
* **Marriage** is uniquely challenging when setting boundaries, as it is a union of “one flesh” and a covenant relationship that reflects Christ’s marriage to the Church. (Eph.5). Although couples are united, individuality is not eliminated in marriage. The marriage makes individuals better through sharpening.
  + We must be aware that we still are responsible for our **feelings.** Honesty about our feelings is most helpful in such relationships, in any relationship. We must be able to honestly tell our spouse how their actions make us feel. Then progress is possible.
  + We must be honest about our own lack of **limits.** As people pleasers or in a confusion over the concept of submission, we can move past love to resentment as we do too much in trying to please the other and avoid conflict at all costs.
  + Cloud and Townsend talk about **“the Law of Power**”. They remind us that in marriage as in every other relationship we do not have the power to change someone or their behavior. Nagging doesn’t help and in fact perpetuates the problem. If we accept them as they are, respect their right to act in a certain way, then give them appropriate consequences for their action, we use our power appropriately. For example, if your spouse comes home drunk you can acknowledge their right to do so, but you can also exert the power that you have to go to a safe family or friend’s house for the night. You also have the power to explain to the kids honestly that the actions that the husband choose to carry out is their choice, but what you put up with is yours.
  + **Submission** : it is helpful here to quote from the book, *Boundaries* directly as Cloud and Townsend relate their own experience.

*We have never seen a “submission problem” that did not have a controlling husband at its root. When the wife begins to set clear boundaries, the lack of Christlikeness in a controlling husband becomes evident because the wife is no longer enabling his immature behavior. She is confronting the truth and setting biblical limits on hurtful behavior. Often, when the wife sets boundaries, the husband begins to grow up.*

**The Most Powerful Word in Boundary Setting…”NO!”**

Without a doubt, the most powerful and useful word in boundary setting is **“NO”.** For many of us, this is a very hard word to say at times. However, if we begin to understand the power, purpose, and often, loving nature of that word, it becomes an extremely useful tool for our benefit and the benefit of our prodigals. We gain freedom in its use. Our prodigals gain personal responsibility and wisdom by hearing it when used appropriately.

How and when we use it is guided by God’s Word, processed in the context of wise Biblical counsel, and bathed in prayer. Remember, prayer is a way to get in alignment with God’s plan for our life. Listening is as important as petitioning Him for wisdom.

**Benefits of Setting Proper Boundaries**

If boundaries are seriously, thoughtfully and prayerfully defined as we follow God’s wisdom found in His Word, the benefits are great. Such boundaries allow us to better steward our life and talents so that we can complete the works he has prepared for us to do. Eph. 2:10 states, *For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Rescuing *,*enabling behavior causes us worry and wastes time, money and resources.

By following God’s commands in parenting to both love (Matt. 19:19, John 13:34) and discipline, (Prov. 19:18,19; 29:15,17,19,21; Ezekiel 33:1-9) we find peace for ourselves, yet allow God to do the work in our children that needs to be done. (Gal. 6:7, Hebrews 12:1-13). Obeying his commands shows we trust Him and love Him (John 14:23, I John 3:24) and brings Him glory. Such obedience gives us peace and models Christ to others.

**Enforcing Consequences**

***“A boundary is only as strong as the consequence given when they are broken”***

*Ecclesiastes 11:8 when the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong*

***You are free to make your own choices, but you are not free to choose your own consequences****.*

Reasonable, solid, well-defined boundaries, guidelines and rules are useless without enforced consequences for breaking them. The stronger, more consistently, and more rigidly the consequences are enforced, the greater the impact the boundaries will have.

The Old Testament dealt with prodigals in a very stern way to say the least.

*If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.” Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.* Deut. 21:18-21

We are not supporting such extreme consequences today, but one might imagine that the prodigal rate in such towns went down after the first stoning!

Thanks be to God that the New Testament model of grace and mercy tempers such rigidity and extreme punishment!

Clear boundaries that are enforced diligently brings peace to the home (Prov.29: 15), provides a safe environment (Prov. 19:18, Prov. 24:11), strengthens loving relationships (Prov. 23:24), develops trust (I John 3:18), models proper parenting (I john 3:18), and brings glory to God by following his commands. (Galatians 6:7).

**Why Do Boundaries Fail?**

The primary reason boundary setting fails is **ineffective or unenforced consequences**. As hard as it is to say, unenforced consequences are a result of a **lack of trust, which is driven by an inadequate or misinformed understanding of God**. People who do not struggle with being a prodigal or addict themselves tend to believe verbal persuasion, reasoning, or threats will work. However Proverbs 29:19 tells us what we see all too often when dealing with a Prodigal. *“A servant can not be corrected by mere words, although they understand they will not respond.* “

We struggle with consequences because it is hard to enforce boundaries if you **fear** that pain or even death of your prodigal will be the result of your actions. Such a perspective shows an inaccurate view of God, one which is mistakenly based on a belief that humanly, you can control the outcome of your prodigal’s lif. (Prov. 21:31)

Our **knowledge of God** is directly related to our **relationship with Him.**  Accurate knowledge of God and intimate loving relationship with Him drives Trust. Trust is the only thing that will allow us to overcome our fear and let outcomes rest in the only place they belong, in God’s hand.

Another reason for boundary failure is often **guilt and shame.** Prior hurts, habits, and hang-ups can interfere with proper boundary setting as parents and spouses of prodigals feel hypocritical to guide anyone in view of their own failures. Once again, this stems from an inaccurate view of God and who they are in Christ. If you find your self in this predicament then you might explore Celebrate Recovery or Re:Generation or a Christian personal recovery program to realize your own identity in Christ first and foremost. You must know for certain that as a believer in Jesus you are both loved and forgiven and your future is secure.

Boundaries with children can fail because **parents are not on the same page**. In the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 18, what do you think might have been the outcome if the mother had sent the Prodigal more money for a second chance? Parents have to be on the same page so that the Prodigal cannot drive a wedge between them.

Finally boundaries can fail due to isolation. We need community to sharpen us and encourage us and admonish us in our journey.

**How is “Boundary and Consequence success” measured?**

It is worth a reminder at this point of a key Prodigal principle. We are not in control of our Prodigals. God is in full control of outcomes. The only person we can control is our self. (Prov. 21:31) With that in mind, we must determine what success looks like with our boundary setting.

Most people suffering in Prodigal chaos are so focused on their prodigals that they fail to realize that ***boundaries are primarily about us and only secondarily about our prodigals***. There is no doubt that setting proper boundaries, properly enforced, will force the Prodigal to experience a reality that will allow them to see truth more clearly. This truth may allow them to take control of their own lives by changing their behavior. However proper boundaries cannot be measured by the outcome of the prodigal, as no boundary can force behavior.

***Successful boundary implementation can be measured by the restoration of order and the reduction or elimination of chaos in our lives***. If proper boundaries are enforced consistently and properly, then the family is safe once again. For believers in Jesus Christ successful boundary setting can result in increased peace, freedom, trust and intimacy with God. In an upcoming lesion we will examine the value of developing a short and long term “plan”, which is nothing more than a simply logical and appropriate list of boundaries and consequences. We will again emphasize that development of such a plan is primarily for you.

*“If we are trying to do His work for Him, we will fail. If we are wishing for Him to do our work for us, He will refuse. But, if we do our work, and God does His, we will find strength in a real relationship with our Creator.* ***“***

Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries*

*As my wife, Ginny and I look back on our journey we gain perspective. We did the best we could do and we trust in God’s grace that overwhelms us. However we look back at opportunities for boundary setting that we let slip away. We think about telling our 6 year old that he is “grounded for a week” for misbehavior, only to realize after the fact that their best friends birthday party is only a few days away. Their friend is disappointed as well as the other parents, so we do the “reasonable thing”. We re-state that our child is grounded for the week, except for the hours of the birthday party! We let other things slide because it was easy, like the selling of the truck as I have mentioned. I will close by simply stating that I only wish I had a chance to re-live that opportunity to ground my 6 year old strictly or to sell that truck. What you don't want is to be forced to set your first firm boundary in the middle of addiction and rebellion when their life is on the line. Trust God and model His boundary setting early and often. You will find His way is Truth and God’s truth will truly set you free.*