**Boundaries and Consequences**

**Prodigal Message #17**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Memory verse of the week:**

**Proverbs 19:18‑19 ESV: “Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death. A man of great wrath will pay the penalty, for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again.”**

*Years ago, my wife, Ginny, and I discussed certain things that we would never allow with our kids. When we discussed these “rules” with our kids (our son and daughter), we were not even aware of the term “boundaries,” but that was exactly what they were. Those rules were boundaries that defined what was acceptable and what was unacceptable in our household and with our children. Ginny and I were firm in our resolve and told our kids as much during our discussion. One of those boundaries was a promise that if either of them was ever caught drinking and driving, we would sell their vehicle.*

*Well, one night, years later, my son called me for help near our home; he had pulled over due to a flat tire. When I arrived to help him, I smelled alcohol on his breath. And, remembering our “rule” very clearly, I mentally wrestled with my next step as I helped my son finish changing the flat tire. I thought about the disruption, conflict, and inconvenience that would occur if we followed through on our “rule” and sold our son’s truck. I pictured Ginny and I as chauffeurs for a 17-year-old for the foreseeable future, and I also imagined the financial loss associated with selling the truck.*

*So, I made my decision. Once my son and I were both inside the truck, I told him that we had something to discuss before we headed home. I told him I knew that he had been drinking, and I reminded him of our deal. Then, I said that I loved him. Finally, because the knowledge of his poor decision would “kill his mother,” I told him to him to consider the seriousness of his crime and to never do it again. We weren’t going to tell mom, and the “next time” something like this happened, I would sell his car for sure.*

*In that moment, I had thought of everything—except for the most important things. In that moment, I made the decision that was the easiest and most convenient for* me*. I had forgotten my purpose, my witness, and what was actually the best, most loving thing that I could do for my son.*

**Introduction: 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 stay in the proper lane and warn you of danger when you veer toward trouble. Also, fences often prevent you from wandering from safety into dangerous areas.

Can you imagine playing or watching a football or baseball game without boundaries? What enjoyment is there when “out of bounds” is ill-defined, when every touchdown is disputed, and when every field goal or home run is subjective? The result would be utter chaos and frustration. Rules and regulations are essential for orderly play.

In the same way, when we do not set *personal* boundaries for what we will and will not allow, what is and is not acceptable, and what we will and will not be responsible for, chaos and frustration are sure to follow. *A family without boundaries—rules and regulations—is a family of disorder and chaos.*

**The purpose of boundaries**

The purpose of boundaries is often misunderstood. Boundaries are primarily about *us*—that is, the boundary-setters. Our boundaries let everyone know what we are and are not responsible for. If enforced strictly and consistently, such boundaries promote peace, physical and mental well-being, and individual fruitfulness as we each focus on our own appropriate responsibilities. From a biblical perspective, boundaries allow us to live the life that God has marked out for us (Ephesians 2:10; 2 Timothy 4:1–4; Hebrews 12:1). Proper biblical boundaries allow us to say “No” to things that are not of God so that we can be fully available to Him and the race that He has for us to run.

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

At one extreme, we are *totally* responsible FOR infants and toddlers. We need to enforce boundaries in order 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*, in any way, responsible FOR our adult children, who are capable of providing for themselves.

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

*In the story above, one could assume that the boundary of “you lose the privilege of having your own car if you’re caught drinking and driving” was to teach my son responsibility, discipline, and—quite simply—to not drink and drive. While that was no doubt true, such a boundary was for Ginny and I as well, as it was intended to help us create and maintain order, clarity, and stability in our lives. Unfortunately, my poor decision led to more rule-breaking and even greater chaos in everyone’s life, as my son—predictably—began to challenge ALL of our rules and boundaries. What’s more, my lack of boundary enforcement and, thus, my failure to lead my wife and my family well led to more than a little marital disharmony and turbulence!*

**Setting appropriate boundaries**

In order to set good, healthy boundaries, we must have a keen awareness of what we are responsible for. This requires much thoughtful consideration and wise counsel. Let’s consider five areas that we are responsible for:

* **Feelings**: We must own our own feelings and emotions. How we react emotionally is our own choice, and if we are honest about our feelings, then we will be able to pinpoint an underlying issue that we can then address.
* **Behaviors**: We are responsible for our own behaviors. Behaviors have consequences: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Galatians 6:7–8).**The law of reaping and sowing is essential for us to teach our children or prodigals responsibility**. When we interfere with this law, we play God and short circuit the vital feedback loop of natural consequences—that is, pain and hardship follow poor, destructive decisions.
  + So, how can we know if and when we should or should not help our prodigals? Other verses in Galatians provide guidance. Galatians 6:2 states that we are to carry each other’s “burdens,” but 6:5 says that each person should carry their own “load.” Though this may, at first glance, seem like a contradiction, there are actually two different words being used in each verse. In verse two, the original Greek word for “burden” is *baros* (meaninga heavy, oppressive load which one person could not possibly lift alone), and, in verse five, the Greek word for “load” is *phortion* (meaning a small load that an individual would be expected to carry, maybe in a backpack). So, there are certain “burdens” that are to be shared among communities (such as a tragedy), but there are also particular “loads” that each individual is responsible for (such as making wise decisions).
  + So, how do we determine what behaviors are enabling and destructive and what behaviors are helpful and constructive? Our advice shouldn’t surprise you: answers can be found by reflecting on God’s Word within a wise and experienced biblical community. Prodigal leadership and closed groups are available 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 the choices that you make.
  + There’s no doubt that some of our prodigals have challenges that limit their capabilities at times (such as psychological disorders), but experience indicates that in the majority of instances, parents or spouses of prodigals *underestimate* how much of a “load” their prodigals can carry in their backpacks, so to speak. Our prodigals are often capable of doing much more than we believe they can. Community proves invaluable feedback 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 the misconception that someone else is responsible for your actions. Only you are responsible for the choices that you make.
* **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’s not true, it will ultimately fail us, and, unfortunately, it usually fails us when we need it most.
  + During your first few weeks at the Prodigal Ministry, you are asked to determine and write out your own 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 is valued above all else and your boundaries will be shaped by that paradigm. If you value anything—or anyone—above God, or you do not believe in God at all, then your choices and boundaries will look much different.
  + For example, if you value your child (or prodigal) above God, then you will prioritize having them “like” you and saving them from pain. In this situation, you will have very soft or even non-existent boundaries, as your prodigal’s manipulation easily causes them to blur or even vanish. If, however, you prioritize God above all else, including yourself and your prodigal, then you will prioritize glorifying God by trusting Him and His Word to guide you in every decision. You choose obedience and trust—instead of fleeting and temporal personal happiness and pleasure—for both you and your children or prodigals. Such boundaries promote personal peace and joy as well as the raising of a responsible, godly child.
* **Limits**:Boundaries are commonly set in order to force others to act in a certain way. But we cannot do that! We cannot control or compel the behavior of others. What we can do, however, is control our exposure to people who are behaving poorly by setting limits.
  + Our model is God. He does not set limits in order to force people to behave but, rather, to reveal and protect His holiness. In setting and maintaining limits, God lovingly allows people to choose freely. Unfortunately, our rebellion separates us from God; it places us outside His limits. 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.”

– Henry Cloud and John Townsend[[2]](#footnote-2)

* Just to be clear, God never moves away from us; instead, we move away from Him by our choices and actions. God is always eager for us to return “home”—either by faith in Christ (if one has never had a relationship with God; Ephesians 2:1–9) or by confession of and repentance from sin (if one has his or her relationship with the Lord inhibited by sin; 1 John 1:9). The choice is ours in accepting the boundaries that God has clearly communicated through His Word. He tells us what He likes and dislikes, what He will allow and won’t allow, and what He is responsible for and what we are responsible for. He confronts sin and sets boundaries for us that will keep us from it.
* However, when we do sin, God loves us enough to allow us to suffer consequences for it, which is always for our own good and benefit.
  + - **Hebrews 12:5–8**: “And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.”
* It is up to us to follow God’s model and set clear, appropriate, and unmoving limits (or boundaries). As lovers of our prodigals, we then stand firm on God’s Word, leaving free choice to our prodigals and allowing them to suffer the consequences of their choices.

**Additional boundary “pearls”**

Cloud and Townsend point out thatas we are raising our young and immature **children** by setting appropriate boundaries for them, we must give them opportunities to say “No.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This allows them to develop their own boundaries in order to feel safe and respected. They cannot do everything 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 to be just like God’s: unconditional.

At the same time, “No” is also the most important word for *us* when *we* are setting boundaries with our children or prodigals. For many of us, however, this is a very hard word to say at times. But, if we begin to understand the purpose, power, and loving nature of this word, then it will be an extremely useful and beneficial tool in setting boundaries for our prodigals. We gain freedom in its use, and our prodigals gain personal responsibility and wisdom by hearing it used appropriately. How and when we use “No” is guided by God’s Word, processed in the context of wise biblical counsel, and bathed in prayer.

And so, our “No’s” stand and will have consequences if our children or prodigals disobey them. We must set and maintain appropriate limits, but we should not be overly controlling. We must keep them safe, but we should also give them room to make mistakes and to learn from them. Hebrews 5:14 states that we become mature through practice: “Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

The setting of boundaries is uniquely challenging in **marriage**. Marriage is a “one flesh” union (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6), a covenant relationship that reflects Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22–33). It is intended to edify each partner through mutual service and sharpening. Although couples are united in marriage, individuality is not, however, eliminated. Each partner is still responsible for their own **feelings**; we should be able to tell our spouse honestly how their actions make us feel. Progress with boundary-setting is only possible when lines of communication are open and clear between spouses.

In being open about our feelings, we must also be honest about our own **limits**—or lack thereof. If we struggle with people-pleasing, conflict-avoidance, or are confused about the concept of “**submission**,” then we can move past love to resentment when our own limits are transgressed. Cloud and Townsend talk about the “**Law of Power**,”[[4]](#footnote-4) reminding us that in marriage, as in every other relationship, we do not have the power to change someone else or their behavior. Nagging doesn’t help and, in fact, perpetuates the problem. However, we use our power in marriage appropriately if we accept our spouses as they are, respect their freedom to act in a certain way, and then execute appropriate consequences for their actions.

Let’s say you’re the wife of an alcoholic husband, for example. If your husband comes home drunk, angry, and belligerent, you can acknowledge his freedom to do so, but you can also exert your power to go to a safe family or friend’s house for the night. You also have the power to explain to your children honestly that your husband’s actions are his choice but what you put up with is your choice. Cloud and Townsend speak wisdom into just such a situation, saying,

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.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Enforcing consequences**

Reasonable, well-defined boundaries are useless if the consequences for transgressing them are not enforced. As Ecclesiastes 8:11 points out, “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.” The more rigidly and consistently that consequences are enforced, the greater the impact that boundaries will have. **A boundary is only as strong as the consequence given when it is broken**. Our children and prodigals need to know with certainty that while they are free to make their own choices, they are not free to choose their own consequences.

The Old Testament dealt with prodigals in a very stern way, to say the least. Deuteronomy 21:18–21 says,

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

Now, we are not supporting such extreme consequences today, but one could very well imagine that the prodigal rate in such towns went down after the first stoning! Thankfully, the New Testament does not perpetuate such harsh consequences for disobedient children. Instead, we have the freedom to parent wisely and to discipline our children as we see fit. And this means maintaining well-defined boundaries and enforcing appropriate consequences.

**Why do boundaries fail?**

The primary reason that boundary-setting fails is **unenforced or ineffective consequences**. Such consequences are a result of **a** **lack of trust in God**,which is itself driven by **an inadequate or misinformed understanding of God**. People who are not prodigals or addicts themselves tend to believe that verbal persuasion, logical reasoning, or threats will work as effective consequences. However, Proverbs 29:19 tells us what we all too often see when dealing with prodigals: “By mere words a servant is not disciplined, for though he understands, he will not respond.”

We often struggle with enforcing consequences because we **fear** our prodigals may experience pain or even death as a result of our actions. Such a perspective, however, exhibits an inaccurate view of God, one which is based on the mistaken belief that, humanly, we can control the outcome of our prodigals’ lives (Proverbs 21:31). *Our knowledge of God is directly related to our relationship with Him*.An accurate knowledge of God and an intimate, loving relationship with Him promotes trust. And trust is the only thing that will allow us to overcome our fears, enforce appropriate consequences, and let outcomes rest in the only place they belong: in God’s hands.

Another typical reason for failure in boundary-setting is **guilt and shame**. Prior hurts, habits, and hang-ups can interfere with proper boundary-setting as loved ones of prodigals often feel too hypocritical, in view of their own failures, to guide anyone else. Such a mindset also stems from an inaccurate view of God and of one’s identity in Christ. If you find yourself in this predicament, then you may want to explore recovery ministries, such as *Celebrate Recovery* or *re:generation*, in order to realize and accept that your identity, first and foremost, is in Christ. Before you can effectively move forward in your prodigal journey, you must know for certain that as a believer in Jesus Christ, you are loved and forgiven and your future is secure in Him. Having an identity solely rooted in Christ allows one to understand God more fully and, thus, have a healthier self-conception—one that leaves no room for guilt and shame.

Boundaries with children can fail when **parents are not on the same page with one another**. In the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 18, what do you think might have been the outcome if the prodigal’s mother had sent him more money for a second chance? Parents have to be on the same page—unified in their boundary-setting and consequence-enforcement—so that their prodigal cannot drive a wedge between them.

Finally, boundaries can fail due to **isolation.** When we are isolated from peers and wise counsel, we are more vulnerable to doubt, manipulation, fear, guilt, shame, etc. Therefore, we need biblical community to sharpen, encourage, and admonish us in our journey (see Prodigal Message #7: Community).

**How is success measured?**

When most of us suffering in prodigal chaos are so focused on our prodigals, we often fail to realize that **boundaries are primarily about us and only secondarily about our prodigals**. There is no doubt that setting and enforcing proper boundaries will force our prodigals to experience a reality that will allow them to see truth more clearly. This truth may help them to take control of their own lives by changing their behavior. Proper boundaries, however, cannot be measured by the outcome of our prodigals’ lives as no boundary can force behavior.

**Successful boundary implementation and maintenance can be measured by the restoration of order and the reduction or elimination of chaos in our lives**. If you have a prodigal, you must come to the point where your peace and joy is independent of your prodigal situation. You *can* have peace in the midst of prodigal chaos. And successfully setting and maintaining healthy boundaries is indicative of that peace and contentment. In an upcoming message, we will examine the value of developing a short- and long-term “plan,” which is nothing more than a simple, logical, and appropriate list of boundaries and consequences (Prodigal Message #19: Plan). We will again emphasize that the development of such a plan is primarily for *you*.

**Conclusion: The benefits of boundary-setting**

The benefits of seriously, thoughtfully, and prayerfully setting boundaries according to the wisdom of God’s Word are incredible. When we set and maintain boundaries for our prodigals in this manner, we are better able to steward our lives—that is, our interests, abilities, and talents—in order to complete the works that God has prepared for us. As Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

When we fail to set or maintain proper boundaries, we are inhibited from effectively carrying out our responsibilities on behalf of the Lord. On the other hand, by following God’s commands to parent with both love and discipline (Proverbs 19:18–19; 29:15, 17, 19, 21; John 13:34; Ephesians 6:4), we allow God to do the work in our children that needs to be done (Proverbs 11:18, 14:14, 22:8; Galatians 6:7; Hebrews 12:1–13). When we set and enforce healthy boundaries, we bring peace to the home (Proverbs 29:15), provide a safe environment (Proverbs 19:18; 24:11), strengthen loving relationships (Proverbs 23:24), model proper parenting (Ephesians 6:4; 1 John 3:18), and develop greater trust in God (Proverbs 9:9–11). We show that we trust and love Him by obeying His commands (John 14:15, 23; 1 John 3:24). We when do, we model Christ to others and glorify God.

“If we are trying to do [God’s] 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.”

– Cloud and Townsend[[6]](#footnote-6)

*As my wife, Ginny, and I look back on our prodigal journey, we gain perspective. We did the best we could do and we entrust the outcomes of our decisions to God’s overwhelming grace. However, we also look back at the boundary-setting opportunities that we let slip away.*

*One occasion we reflect on is when we told our 6-year-old son that he was “grounded for a week” due to misbehavior, only to realize, after the fact, that his best friend’s birthday party was only a few days away. His friend and all the other parents at the party would have been disappointed, so we did the “reasonable thing.” We re-stated that our son was grounded for the week,* except for *the hours of the birthday party!*

*Looking back, we let all manner of things slide because it was easier and more convenient for us to do so, like not selling my son’s truck when he was caught drinking and driving. And so, I wish I had a chance to re-live those opportunities to* truly *ground my 6-year-old son or to sell my 17-year-old son’s truck.*

*The last thing you want is to be forced to set your first firm boundary in the middle of prodigal addiction and rebellion when your prodigal’s life is on the line. Know God, trust Him, and model wise, biblical boundary-setting early and often. If you do, you will find peace and joy in the midst of your circumstances. You will experience the truth of God in Christ, and it will set you free (John 8:31–38; Galatians 5:1).*

**Closed Group Discussion Questions**

**Day 1**

Define in your own words what a *personal* boundary is and what its purpose is for you and your prodigal.

**Day 2**

We often underestimate how much our prodigals can accomplish and how much weight they can carry (see Galatians 6:7). What are some ways that we can make this determination more accurately?

**Day 3**

Describe, with scriptural support, the ways in which God models boundaries and consequences for us.

**Day 4**

Consequences that are promised but not enforced is an example of enabling. What are some of the causes of enabling? Do any of them apply to you? (If necessary, review Prodigal Message #9: Codependency and Enabling)

**Day 5**

How do you measure success in setting boundaries and enforcing consequences?

**Day 6**

What are the benefits to *us* in setting and maintaining boundaries?

**NOTES**

1. The audio version of this message is available at:[audio link placeholder]. The video version is available at: [video link placeholder]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries*, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries*, 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries*, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)