



Loving Boundaries

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I want to talk about loving boundaries. This may sound like a weird idea, but I had to learn the hard way the importance of creating and maintaining boundaries. Once I embraced boundaries, I began to see them everywhere in Scripture, and especially practiced by our Lord Jesus Christ. These boundaries are not there to shut others out, or to push them away, but to protect us and our well-being. Boundaries enable us to respect others and to treat others and ourselves with dignity. Boundaries are about finding the right balance in our service to others.

The Beginning

My journey with boundaries started in 2002, when my husband and I met a 23-year-old brother (let's call him Bill) who struggled – and still struggles – with both alcohol and drug addiction. He has been in and out of our lives for the past 20 years. The first ten years were full of stress, chaos, and tears. They were also occupied by a huge misunderstanding between me and my Higher Power about our role in Bill's life. In contrast, the last ten years have been heavily supported by my Al-Anon 12-step program and, on the whole, are now full of acceptance, courage, and serenity. Whereas Alcoholics Anonymous is the 12-step program for people struggling with addiction, the similar sounding Al-Anon is the 12-step program for family and friends of alcoholics, whose lives have become unmanageable due to a loved one's alcoholism.

On the 3rd of May 2010, in the heyday of the chaos decade, we had to tell Bill (who at this point was 31 years old) that he could no longer live in our home. This was one of the hardest decisions I have had to make. It was both an act of desperation and also the right thing to do. That evening, I walked into the basement of a church and attended my first Al-Anon 12-step meeting. I have been a fully engaged member ever since. It took me a couple of years to grasp the seemingly counterintuitive concepts of Al-Anon's 12 steps and slogans, but I have put them into

practice in a way that has helped me grow significantly. Best of all, my 12-step program beautifully dovetails with my Christian faith.

The two pillars of my spiritual walk are the Greatest Commandments and the Serenity Prayer: *‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself’* and *‘God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference’*. We will come back to these later.

Manipulating, Managing, Mothering, and Martyrdom

Among other unhealthy, unloving behaviors, I am in recovery from the Four M’s. The Four M’s are subtle, they sneak up on you, and they cause harm to everyone involved. The Four M’s is the label that my 12-step program uses to describe the behaviors and attitudes that we adopt when trying to control things that we have no business controlling. We use manipulation, managing, mothering, and martyrdom as techniques to respectively trick, cajole, encourage, and guilt someone else to do what we think is best for them. (*As if we know!*)

Let me give you a real-life example of my lack of boundaries before Al-Anon. One day, my husband and I sensed that we had about three days before Bill left our house for a week-long alcohol and drug-using binge. We could predict this based on past experience as evidenced by his body language, the music he was listening to, the way he moved his hands, and how he walked. In an attempt to control the situation and prevent his binge from happening, I took Bill out for ice-cream – the kind where you add chocolate, nuts, fresh fruit, candies – then to a clothing store for a tee-shirt of his choice, and then back home to watch whatever movie he fancied. I honestly thought that if we loved him enough (gifts is one of his top Love Languages), he would not need to fill the ‘empty hole’ with substances. I was trying to *manage*, *manipulate*, and *mother* him into remaining sober. And when he left three days later on an alcohol and drug binge, I went into fully-fledged *martyrdom*: *How could he do this to us? If he loved us, he wouldn’t do this! After everything I have done for him..., etc.* I would lie in bed literally crying to God saying, ‘I cannot do this,’ (meaning, having Bill in our lives) but feeling that this act of service was something God had asked me to do. This is a small example of the constant chaos that existed in our lives for over a decade.

I will not go into the details about how we met this young brother while he was in prison, but I will say that inviting him to live in our home and become part of our family felt God-led. I genuinely thought that God had placed this person in our lives so we could change *his life* for the better. Through the many years of anguish, tears, and struggle, I believed that I was answering my calling from God. And, at the same time, I had many years of people in my church telling me that I was *amazing*, and as *patient as Job*, and that *he was lucky to have us*, etc., all of which made me feel I had to keep going. But, as I said, finally (on 3 May 2010) we had to ask him to leave our home. That evening, I went to my first Al-Anon meeting in tears, and I have attended meetings ever since.

It took me at least a year of sitting in meetings each Sunday night, listening to other people sharing their experiences of life before and after joining Al-Anon, to finally realize that God had put Bill in *my* life to change *me!* And I needed to change. I had been committing the Four M's my whole life in many situations. I have *managed*, *mothered*, and *manipulated* people and events so that they went more smoothly (*according to me*), and have been a *martyr* when I had to drop whatever I was doing to help others. Of course, to other people it looks organized, responsible, reliable – and most of the time it makes their lives a bit easier.

These 4 M's are incredibly subtle and it takes years of practice to see them for what they really are: unloving and unhealthy behaviors. They were ways to either trick myself into the illusion of control, or convince myself I was 'esteeming others better than myself' and therefore acting in a Christlike way towards others by putting myself last. But these behaviors are actually unhealthy and *not* Christlike!

Burdens and Loads

A couple of verses in Galatians have always spoken to me. I had spent years mulling them over because I found them confusing, and I usually only focused on the first half of the verses – to my detriment. It has only been in the last ten years that I finally understand what Paul is telling us, and what my response has to be.

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own

actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load. Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor. (Gal 6:1-6, NIV)

At first glance, this passage contradicts itself: we are supposed to carry each other's burdens but we are also told that each one should carry their own load. How can both of these instructions be given? Which one should I follow? Thanks to Dr Henry Cloud and Dr John Townsend and their book *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*, I now have a better understanding of this passage, and it has helped me gain perspective on how *my* life interacts with *your* life.

Paul tells us that in certain circumstances I have a responsibility *to you*, and at other times I have a responsibility *for myself*. The Greek word for our English 'burden' is actually 'excessive burden' – a burden so heavy that it weighs us down. Huge, unsurmountable barriers to forward movement. Cloud and Townsend refer to these as *boulders* that we cannot carry by ourselves. They will break our backs. The Greek word for our 'load' implies 'cargo' or 'daily toil'. These are the everyday things we all need to do. Cloud and Townsend refer to these loads as a *backpack*, a daily weight which we should be able to carry ourselves. So, Paul is encouraging us to help each other with excessive burdens (our boulders) but he is also saying that we should all bear our daily toil (backpacks) ourselves.

Boulders and Backpacks

The trouble comes when we confuse boulders and backpacks. Some of us treat our boulder as if it is a backpack. We heft it around and refuse to ask for help. As a result, we live in perpetual pain – physical, emotional, spiritual pain. Unfortunately, we normalized the pain: we have taken on the 'excessive' burden as our Christian duty. We have developed a 'put-myself-last' mentality. But to follow Paul's teaching and put the Law of Christ into practice, we actually need to learn to *ask for help* with these boulders.

And, at the same time, we inadvertently enable other people to become irresponsible by carrying *their* backpacks *for them*. Some people treat their backpack as if it were a heavy boulder and believe they cannot carry it. They expect help from others. They risk becoming irresponsible – by not carrying their own backpack – whenever those of us who are so busy carrying our own

boulder think, ‘Oh sure, I can carry your backpack, too. What’s one more thing?’ Paul says that each of us could – and should – actually carry our *own* backpack.

We also need to ask for help with *our* boulder before we go around helping other people with *their* boulders. Otherwise this is when ugliness begins to leak out: when resentment builds, along with anger and impatience, and we risk snapping explosively or ending up in a lump of exhausted tears. This is the cause of us going ballistic when someone asks for a very small favor. They raise their eyebrows in a ‘Wow! What’s up with you?’ way. When we stop carrying other people’s backpacks for them, we may even notice that our boulder actually becomes lighter.

I have often helped others carry their boulders as if this was my calling. I have also, somewhat begrudgingly, carried other people’s backpacks, thinking I was being loving when I was actually filled with resentment. In my defense, I didn’t know they were backpacks. I thought they were smaller boulders. And I would beat myself up for feeling resentful, which I interpreted as being selfish and unkind.

Boundaries

Al-Anon helped me focus on my behaviors with fresh eyes. One of the tools of my 12-step program that I find the most helpful in addressing these unhealthy tendencies is boundaries. Once I became *aware* of my 4 M behaviors and how disrespectful they are towards others, and after I *accepted* that I can no longer continue trying to control someone else, I went into *action*. *How do I stop? How do I change my behaviors?* Well, boundaries helps tremendously.

In order to manage our own burdens and daily loads, we need boundaries. I realize that the word ‘boundaries’ has been bandied about so much recently that some of us may have a knee-jerk reaction against this concept. But please bear with me as we delve a little deeper into this multifaceted, much-needed, life skill.

What do I mean by my loving ‘boundaries’?

- Not jumping in to help without being asked. Rather, asking ‘Would you like help?’ or waiting to be asked for help (sometimes people just need to vent). This is nuanced, and with practice I began to sense when to wait and when to offer help.
- Offering specific practical help that fits in with my skills, and time. For example, ‘I can come over on Tuesdays or Thursdays. I can do laundry, clean the house, walk the dog,

help kids with homework, cook a meal, pull weeds, drive you to your appointments, help you find professional services (therapy or treatment) and take you to an Al-Anon meeting.’

- Not assuming that I know best, when I don’t have all the facts. Instead, reminding myself that often it’s none of my business. I remind myself that your Higher Power has plans for you that I know nothing about.
- Learning to say ‘No’ without going into a long story about why I can’t do whatever you’ve asked me.

Honestly, the last one is the hardest for me. It feels so rude to say No. It feels so un-Christlike. But doing something I don’t have time for – or doing something I have no interest in or doing something when I know you are more than capable of doing it yourself – only leads to resentment building up inside me. And when I listen to my body by sensing my gut tightening, hearing the nagging voice in my head going on and on, then I know I am living in resentment. *Resentment is not Christlike!* It is also not loving myself.

If I am living in resentment, then I have crossed a boundary. I am no longer living in *my* life, but have moved into *yours*. I do not belong in your life, without first asking if you would like help. I can help you *alongside*. I can *help* you carry your boulder. I do not carry your boulder *for you*. It’s a subtle but hugely important difference.

In the Al-Anon world we talk of our primary boundary as a hula-hoop. This metaphor is useful in the context of giving up the illusion of control. Control is basically the end goal that the 4 M’s try to achieve with such desperation and futility. We come to realize that the only thing we can control is what fits inside a hula-hoop: which is usually just one individual. I cannot control anything outside my hula-hoop. The Serenity Prayer supports this endeavor,

God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change (outside my hula-hoop), courage to change the things I can (inside), and wisdom to know the difference.

And so does the Greatest Command,

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (inside), and love your neighbor as yourself (outside).

I personally don’t want anyone to practice the 4 M’s on me! I don’t like it when people try to control me. These two pillars help me lovingly treat others with the dignity and respect that all human beings deserve. They also help me love myself. Once I stopped trying to control things

outside my hula-hoop, I realized how futile and exhausting it had been. I have found that healthy, loving boundaries have brought me stability, security, and serenity.

Now, to be clear, struggling with addiction is a burden: it's a huge boulder for both the alcoholic and their family and their friends. But the daily load of sobriety needs to be done by oneself: again, for everyone involved. In all 12-step programs there is a slogan, *One Day at a Time*, which is basically the backpack slogan. Jesus also encourages me to live one day at a time,

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matt 6:34)

Staying inside my hula-hoop, one day at a time, helps me to stop carrying other people's backpacks when they need to be carrying them for themselves. As a conflict-avoidant person, this has been the hardest thing for me to practice. But I am learning that a simple, 'No, I am unable to do that' or 'No, that's not going to work for me' is all I need to say. I don't need to explain why.

The Present

Just as I felt that God had led me to connect with Bill and welcome him into our family, I also felt God led me to Al-Anon. Jesus yoked me with Al-Anon to help with my burden of being overly responsible for other people, for being a people-pleaser to my detriment. Jesus helped me see how I had misunderstood my Christian duty to serve others. Through Al-Anon, and helpful books, Jesus has helped me stop presuming I know what's best for people.

Now that I am living within my own hula-hoop, I have more energy and creativity to serve in ways that use my God-given gifts. Today my life is filled with mutually beneficial service. One of the most rewarding ways I serve our faith community is through Press On. I love helping others find their voice, and I am regularly surrounded by spiritually-minded people who share their insights into scripture in deep and practical ways.

Jesus and Burdens

As I just alluded, thinking of burdens always takes me to the words of Jesus,

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt 11: 25-30, NIV)

Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden is light. He suggests that we learn from him. What are we to learn? I think the first thing is that we need to reach out to Jesus for help, just as he reached out to his Father. Jesus spent many hours in meditation and conversation with his Heavenly Father. He also carved out time to be alone and away from people with their demands. He said No to people: mainly the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, but also to his disciples when they pushed for him to become King before was ready.

Jesus knows about heavy burdens, and he knows that burdens require more than one person to carry them. Jesus didn't carry his burden alone: he chose twelve men to help him carry out his mission. He also accepted the financial and emotional help of a handful of women who joined his ministry. He asked his disciples for help in the Garden of Gethsemane. He accepted help from Simon of Cyrene with carrying his cross.

Jesus and Boundaries

Jesus also knew a lot about boundaries. He practiced them in his life, and he set us an example to follow. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a great demonstration of someone who maintained his boundaries while helping someone else with their burden. In a loving and appropriate way, the Good Samaritan helped the man who had been attacked and robbed. The Good Samaritan took the injured man to an inn, paid for room and board, and promised the innkeeper that he would return later to check in on the situation. And then the Good Samaritan continued on his way to conduct whatever business he had been on the way to do. *He didn't drop everything in his own life.* He helped lift the boulder, but he didn't try to carry the backpack. He had loving boundaries. The Good Samaritan loved the injured man without making him a charity case. And the Good Samaritan loved himself, too: he took care of his own needs. No resentment.

Jesus, in turn, helped hundreds of people with their burdens. Jesus had the power to remove people's burdens! He gave back sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, the ability to speak to the mute, the ability to walk to the lame. Not being able to see, hear, talk or walk are huge burdens that in many ways would hinder people to perform their daily toil. Jesus didn't just help carry these burdens, he actually *removed* them. He also healed both physical and mental ailments for many people which enabled them to reenter society and perform their daily toil. Jesus cured leprosy, schizophrenia, epilepsy, and hemorrhaging. Jesus also brought people back to life!

What I find fascinating about Jesus is that he didn't cross people's boundaries when he helped them. Those who wanted to be healed *reached out to him* either on their own – by calling out, by walking up to him, by touching his clothing, by asking for healing – or with the help of family members and friends who took them *to Jesus* or *asked* Jesus to go to them. Even Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus and be seen by him: he invited an interaction with Jesus.

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. (Matt 12:22)

Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. (Matt 15:30)

Jesus waited for people to ask for help rather than commit the 4 M's and trample over people's dignity by doing what he thought was best for them.

The incident with Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52) is a stunning example of Jesus' respect for people and their autonomy. Jesus and his disciples are leaving Jericho. On the way out of the city Jesus hears someone calling, 'Son of David, have mercy on me.' *Son of David* is code for King Jesus – here is a true believer in the core identity of Jesus. Jesus stops. He tells his disciples or the people to call Bartimaeus to him. Bartimaeus threw aside his cloak (think about that: a valuable possession) and found his way to Jesus. Jesus could have walked to the blind man, but he didn't. He trusted that Bartimaeus would find him. And then Jesus asks him, *What do you want me to do for you?* I am assuming Jesus could see that Bartimaeus was blind. However, Jesus doesn't assume anything! He doesn't presume to know what's best for Bartimaeus. Jesus asks him what he wants. It's very simple: *I want to see.* Bartimaeus was immediately given sight. And, perhaps, walked back to pick up his cloak before following Jesus through the gate and into his new life.

I think Jesus lives inside his hula-hoop and doesn't cross through boundaries (his or ours) into our lives until we invite him.

Until we call out for help.

If we want to emulate his example, we should recognize our own unhealthy grasps for control, we should distinguish between boulders and backpacks, and we should practice living inside our hula-hoop.