

Chapter 17

ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

Sandra was stretched almost beyond her limit. She had just rescued the puppy from being drowned in the toilet by Tommy, her 2 year old. Now her newborn was wailing and she knew from that certain aroma that another diaper change was needed. And now the telephone was ringing. "Not my mother," she said, "Not now!" She had gone through all of this yesterday, and the day before, and the day before. She had pleaded with her mother: "Mom, I really don't have time to talk with you right now. My two children..." But her mother had started crying and saying, "You don't love me! I ought to kill myself so that you won't be 'bothered' by your poor lonely mother who loves you so much. Your father ran off and left me all alone, and now my children don't love me or respect me; besides that..." Sandra said, "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Of course I love you. Please don't talk about killing yourself. I know that you took care of us after Dad ran off." Then her mom kept her on the phone for 4 hours! The same as she did every day. "I really ought to just let the phone ring," she thought to herself, "but what if mom is feeling desperate and really killed herself? I could never forgive myself." Reluctantly she picked up the phone. "Oh, hello, Mom..."

Misunderstandings of boundary issues and the conflicts regarding boundaries can be at the root of a lot of problems: depression, anxiety, eating disorders, addictions, guilt, marital and family problems. Some people think that establishing boundaries is selfish, unchristian, and unloving. Others don't know how to react when someone is hurt or upset by the boundaries they establish and yet, it is a scriptural concept. Remember when King Saul became jealous of David and tried to kill him? Several times Saul tried to kill David with a spear.(1) David didn't simply turn the other cheek and allow Saul to kill him, he protected himself. He ran away and hid, and God commended David for using common sense in doing that.

The church has at times taken certain teachings of Jesus out of context and made an absolute law out of them without balancing them with other teachings of His on the same subject.

For instance, Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that we should turn the other cheek,(2) and on many occasions that is exactly what Jesus did when it was the right thing to do in response to His Father's will.(3) But on one occasion, as recorded in John 18:19-24, when Jesus was slapped in the face by a soldier, He did not turn the other cheek. Instead, He rebuked that soldier. In Matthew 18:22 Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that they should forgive others even 70 X 7 times. In other words, extend unlimited forgiveness to others. I think this is one of the verses that is so misunderstood. We seem to take it for granted that God meant on every occasion we are to turn the other cheek and forgive again and again. Yes, forgiveness must always be given. But at times there are other things to do about the situation. In the very same chapter, in Matthew 18:15, Jesus says, "What should you do if your brother sins against you?" Should you forgive him? Yes, you should forgive him, but He says, (to paraphrase) When your brother sins against you, you should go and talk to him privately and in a gentle way tell him how he has offended and try to get it straightened out. If he won't listen to you, take someone with you so you will have a witness, and again appeal to him and try to get the matter settled. If he still won't listen to you, tell it to the church (and, of course, that has to be interpreted. Does that mean you talk to the pastor about it and get the pastor to go with you? Does it mean you get the board at your church involved? Does it mean you get on the platform before the whole church? It

depends on the situation and on the bylaws of your church. You have to pray for wisdom, perhaps talk it over with your pastor or an elder, and figure out what is the responsible, loving thing to do). If he still won't listen to the church and continues to offend you then you treat him like a tax collector, like a Gentile. How were tax collectors and Gentiles treated in that day? They were ignored. They had nothing to do with them. The idea is not to become hateful and vindictive but to exert pressure with the purpose of bringing the offender to repentance. So there is a lot more to this teaching about forgiving 70 times 7 than seems at first apparent.

Consider an event when Jesus established a boundary:

Jesus went to His hometown Nazareth and spoke at the synagogue and the people were offended because He pointed out that at times the Gentiles had been more responsive to the prophets than the Jews. They became so furious at Him that they took Him outside to the high bluff on which the town is situated with the intention of throwing him off to his death. But, "He walked away through the midst of them."⁽⁴⁾ Perhaps He did so by virtue of His stately bearing, or perhaps by angelic help. We don't understand what happened except we know that Jesus did not turn the other cheek. He did not allow them to throw Him off to His death. He protected Himself because that was the right thing for Him to do at the time. There came a time when He allowed Himself to be beaten and scourged and nailed to a cross because that was God's will for Him to do at that time. Before then it was not time for Him to be killed and He did not permit it. Jesus lived only to please and honor His Father. He only did what He saw the Father doing.⁽⁵⁾ He prayed in the Garden on the night before His crucifixion: "O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."⁽⁶⁾

I read a testimony of a Christian business man. He hired a young man from a bad background with the intention of giving him a chance to straighten out his life. He witnessed to him about Christ and tried to teach him how to walk a straight path. After many months had passed, the business man learned that this young man had been embezzling a great deal of money from the company. What did the man do? He called the police. He filed charges and testified against the young man, who subsequently was sentenced to jail. The business man visited the young man in jail during his sentence and told him that he forgave him, he cared about him, but it was essential that he should learn that there are consequences to one's actions.

Consider again: he forgave the young man and didn't hold bitterness and resentment in his heart toward him, but he established boundaries. He said, "The way you have been acting is wrong and you must pay for it." This is the same way good parents treat their children: they forgive them and never hold resentment against them, but they punish their children when it is appropriate. This is also the way our heavenly Father treats us: "*Those whom He loves, He chastises*"⁽⁷⁾ He must love me a lot, how about you?

There are also times when we should turn the other cheek. The danger of this teaching on boundaries is that we can use it to justify our refusal to obey Christ when turning the other cheek is the very thing we should do. Many times, when we turn the other cheek, our action is the very thing that

sets someone else free.

A master sergeant was close to retirement, and he was a wonderful, committed Christian. Someone asked him how a man who had spent his life in the army had become such a faithful Christian. He said, "Well, many years ago I was in a barracks and a young man was one of the new recruits, and every night at bed time he would get down on his knees by his bed to pray. The men in the barracks laughed and ridiculed him, and his praying got under my skin. One night I took my boots up into my bunk with me, and when the young man knelt down to pray I threw one of my boots really hard and hit him in the back. He never flinched and continued praying. I threw the other boot and hit him in the back, and again he didn't flinch. I went to sleep. The next morning when I got up, there were my boots under my bunk shined to a high gloss. I was astounded. I went to him and said, "How could you do that?" He told me about Jesus. It broke my heart and I became a Christian.

Saundra, the young mother whose story was illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, finally went for counseling to get help. She wept as she shared her feelings of entrapment. The

counselor gently spoke to her, "Saundra, your mother has deep problems. She seems to feel desolate and abandoned and hopeless. She has an emptiness inside and desperately wants to be loved and appreciated. All of us have those needs. Since you are the only family member who has not run away from her, she has been latching onto you with so much fear that she is pulling you down with her. Her cycle is driven by the fear of losing you, and it is not healthy for either one of you. This is what I encourage you to do: go and see your mother and honestly tell her what she is doing to you. Tell her that you love her, and that you want her to get spiritual and emotional help from a Christian counselor. If she wants to come and see me, I will be glad to help. However, tell her that it is simply impossible for things to continue as they have been. Because of her unreasonably long telephone calls, you have been neglecting your babies, which is dangerous and damaging to them. Assure her that you love her and that in fact you will initiate the phone calls every day at convenient times and talk for only a little while – say 5 or 10 minutes. When the time is up, tell her you love her, tell her goodbye and hang up. If she calls you, especially at an inopportune time, simply tell her that you will call back when you can. Saundra, your mother has an emotional problem and is manipulating you. That is not love, it is control. You are not helping your mother by being passive and letting her play these manipulative games. To help her, you must be strong."

Another common problem concerns wives who are being abused by their husbands and who don't know how to establish proper boundaries for themselves. Personally, I have very strong feelings about this subject. I have counseled scores of wives who were being terribly abused physically and emotionally. They were being controlled and dominated with incessant emotional and verbal abuse. Some were being humiliated, beaten, tormented, and tortured in shocking ways by their husbands. I have also ministered to people who were abused as children or who lived in families where children were being abused. I do not believe that it is God's will for a wife to live with an abusive husband. I know what God says about divorce, but I believe when we take these teachings and make an absolute law out of them, we distort God's heart. In every teaching where God says that wives must submit to their husbands, it also says that husbands are to love their wives, and the passage in Ephesians 5:25

says they must love them as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. I counsel people with fear and trembling. I don't want to be disobedient to God, but I am absolutely convinced that it is never God's will for a wife to live with a husband who beats her, who torments her, who beats the children, or who sexually molests the children. I am convinced as well that if a husband is a drunkard or a drug addict, if he lays around the house and makes no effort to support his family (assuming that there is not a legitimate reason for such conduct) or if he is being consistently unfaithful to his wife, then it is he who has broken the marriage vows. For God's sake, our first obligation is to protect our children and then we have an obligation to protect ourselves. When I look at marriages where there is an abusive husband and father, I don't see any good fruit when the wife allows the heinous behavior to proceed unimpeded. You can find some insightful teachings on this subject in the book Boundaries by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend.

Another excellent book is Turning Fear to Hope by Holly Green.

I believe that we need to get our thinking and our hearts right about this matter so we can give good Christian counsel to the many wives and mothers who are trapped in these kinds of situations. The church has been part of the problem by telling them it is God's will for them to stay and allow this abuse to continue. Doesn't God's word tell us to help the helpless? I know of churches in Mexico where the pastor and one or two elders go and sit down with alcoholic husbands who have a habit of beating their wife and children. They have a long talk with them. They talk about the Lord and His love in an attempt to lead the husband to Christ. If he is recalcitrant, they talk to him about the fear of the Lord and the judgment he is storing up for himself. Then they tell him that if they hear of his beating on his family again they will turn him in to the police, and if that does not change his conduct they will come and visit him again and will not be so friendly. That kind of proactive counseling seems a lot more Godly than what many pastors do. They seem to take little interest in helping the poor defenseless wife and children. They might think a little differently if there were a big husky guy in the community who came by once or twice a month to beat the stuffing out of the pastor, and each time he would say, "I'm sorry to take my frustrations out on you, but you are a good Christian, and you know that tribulation is good for your soul. You also know that Jesus said to turn the other cheek and to forgive me 490 times. See you next week!" Even if the pastor believed the teaching about turning the other cheek applied in every situation, I think that after a while he would start searching the Scriptures for loopholes. I am not saying that wives should divorce their abusive husbands, but I am saying they should separate until the husband gets help and shows some evidence of change. And I don't mean that they should separate for a few days or a week because it may take a period of months or years before the husband can get himself healthy enough to be the kind of husband and father that God called him to be. The purpose of separation is to hopefully wake the husband up so that he has an opportunity to repent and save his marriage and save himself from destruction here and hereafter by turning to the Lord.

One final observation: Abuse is not always inflicted by the husband in marriage. I have also

ministered in situations where the wife had an out of control temper and was the one doing the cursing, the hitting and the beating of the husband and children.

Since I was for many years an emotionally and verbally abusive husband, I believe I am especially sensitive to spouses and children who are being abused (thank God I never abused my children!). Also, because God by His mercy rescued me and restored my marriage; in fact, made it better than it had ever been, I am also full of faith and hope that any marriage can be rescued by the Lord Jesus.

Endnotes

- (1) 1 Samuel 18:11, 19:10
- (2) Matthew 5:39
- (3) Mark 15:65
- (4) Luke 4:30
- (5) John 5:19
- (6) Matthew 26:39
- (7) Hebrews 12:6