



Emotion is what hits you. A feeling is what you choose to hold on to.

Lesson 10

Keeping Between the Lines: Boundaries

It was a beautiful fall day. The afternoon sun danced through the golden leaves as I turned from our driveway onto the little Tennessee country road. Mom and I, like two carefree teenagers, were talking and laughing together on our way to celebrate her grandson's birthday. Then at the top of a hill, I froze in terror! A van was coming straight toward us in our lane. The head-on collision was unavoidable. A young mother had turned wide from her grandmother's driveway, crossing the center line. And at that moment my life changed forever.

Twenty-two days later my mother died, and I was on crutches, not knowing if my nearly amputated foot would heal sufficiently for me to ever walk again. "Why," I questioned, "did this happen? It was so senseless. Mom and I were in perfect health. We weren't doing anything wrong. And now she was dead, and I was hurting." "Lord," I prayed, "what can I learn from this to make me a better person?"

My answer came in the words of a country song about a boy sitting behind the wheel of a car with his dad in the passenger seat. The boy was about to drive for the first time and was scared. His father reassured him with this advice, "Just keep it between the lines."¹

"Yes!" I thought. "Keep it between the

lines!" If only that young mother would have kept her van between the lines and not steered into my lane, I wouldn't be suffering this agony.

Then it came to me that just as crossing the line on a road brought physical pain, injury, and death, so can crossing the line in relationships bring emotional pain, injury, and death: The pain of anger when our rights are violated, the injury to our sense of personhood when someone tries to control us, and too often, the resulting death of a relationship through separation or divorce.

Robert Frost once said that good fences make good neighbors. Just as neighbors need clear property lines, it's important to have clear relational boundaries, or you will end up stepping on others—and they'll end up trampling on you.

First, you must have physical boundaries about who can touch you and under what circumstances.

Second, you need mental boundaries that give you freedom to have your own thoughts and opinions—and allow others the right to have theirs.

Third, emotional boundaries help you take ownership for your emotions and free you from having to feel responsible for or react to the harmful, manipulative emotions of others.

Good marriages require good boundaries.

Unless you know who you are and take personal responsibility for your own feelings, attitudes, behavior, values, time, and choices, it's difficult to be a meaningful helpmate for another without overstepping your bounds.

- Without boundaries one spouse can feel used by the other who takes advantage of the other's willingness to carry more than his or her fair share of home responsibilities. For example, the husband who drops his towel and clothes on the floor, knowing his wife will pick up after him, although the wife resents having to do it.
- Without boundaries, one spouse often ends up feeling responsible for the other's emotions—trying to make one happy or placating one if angry. Or one can blame, withdraw, or ridicule, hurting the other in an attempt to make himself or herself feel better. For example, the frustrated wife who stays home because she thinks her husband wouldn't be happy if she worked. Or the husband who withdraws to Monday night football for his own pleasure, leaving his spouse a TV widow.
- Without boundaries, one almost always ends up controlling the other. Too often, one spouse becomes the aggressor, using anger, withdrawal, or manipulation to get his or her way; and the other becomes the dumpster for fear, guilt, shame, and self-depreciation. One example is the spouse who has learned that yelling is the way to get what he or she wants, because the other is afraid of conflict and submits to keep the peace.
- Without boundaries, trust can easily be

violated when a mate becomes involved in an affair.

- Without boundaries, unhealthy habits can become destructive compulsions. The result is often workaholism, sexual addictions, or alcohol and other drug addictions. Too often, if there aren't boundaries, the spouse of an addict becomes co-dependent, either taking abuse or enabling the habit to continue by trying to protect the other's reputation.

One of the most important boundaries couples must establish is simply the ability to say No.

Carrie was raised with the life commandment to serve others. But what was missing to keep her life in balance was the corresponding life commandment to allow others to serve her. So when Carrie got married, she became the yes-person in the relationship. Her husband grew dependent on her willingness to do whatever he asked, her children shirked home responsibilities—knowing Mom would eventually do their chores for them—and as her own parents got older, they needed Carrie to do things they could no longer do for themselves. The result? Carrie became angry, resentful, and depressed. We call it BURNOUT!

The problem was, Carrie never learned to say No. She never learned where her responsibilities ended and others' began. She thought she was doing all these things for others out of love, but she wasn't. A counselor helped her see that **she was really motivated by her fear of not being accepted** if she didn't do what others

wanted or expected her to do.

Once Carrie started to say No, an amazing thing happened. Her husband began to respect her, her children felt better about themselves because they were now learning to take responsibility, and her parents found that others could help and began to make new friends. Carrie's inability to say No not only hurt her, but her family as well! No is an important boundary statement.

If you find yourself doing more than your share, one way to establish healthy boundaries is to think of all those things you think you "have to do" as if they were monkeys hanging onto you and screaming for your attention. But the rule is, **you are responsible only for your own monkeys**—and you're not the only monkey keeper in the zoo! It's important to know that these "monkeys" are worse than stray dogs; if you feed them (start doing their jobs), they will never leave. And if you keep feeding them, you will eventually feel used, frustrated, and angry. So you must learn to say, "No, that's not my monkey," if someone asks or expects you to do something above and beyond what you should be responsible for or would want to do.

Here's an important boundary! Don't do something for others that would be beneficial for them to do themselves. Doing an occasional favor for someone or helping another when they have a need is a Good Samaritan act of love, but taking over responsibilities that rightfully belong to another is like stealing something valuable from them.

The opposite extreme can be just as

harmful. You cross the responsibility line when you expect others to do things for you for which you should be responsible. In a good marriage, two responsible adults balance their responsibilities, each pulling his or her own fair share, asking for help when needed, and then communicating appreciation when it is given.

Learning boundaries is the work of early childhood. Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, in their classic book *Boundaries*, suggest children by the age of three should have mastered the following tasks:

1. The ability to be emotionally attached to others, yet without giving up a sense of self and one's freedom to be apart.
2. The ability to say appropriate No's to others without fear of loss of love.
3. The ability to take appropriate No's from others without withdrawing emotionally.²

Growing up physically is tough enough, but growing up emotionally can be extremely frustrating. If you're still struggling with some of these boundaries (which experts say should be in place by age three) and feel pulled by peer pressure, controlled by parents, or frustrated by the lack of appropriate restraint and self-control in your own life, now is the time to learn how to be a healthy boundary-setter. If you wait until you're seriously involved in a relationship or married, you'll find yourself hurting the one you love most!

Many teens have found that being a part of a good peer support group that meets regularly with a skilled facilitator helps them share concerns and receive encouragement.

Others would rather work individually with a counselor to sort through the garbage in their pasts, bury it, and get on with learning more healthy ways to interact with their families and friends.

Taking a closer look at family violence, which is one of the results of not having healthy boundaries, will help you realize why it's so important to clean up your painful past before falling in love.

Family Violence

What you learn in childhood sets you up for what you expect and how you act in marriage. If you don't learn to set boundaries in childhood, you are likely to become either an abuser or the victim of abuse in

your marriage. For example, individuals who have violent, abusive childhoods are more likely to become child and spouse abusers than are individuals who experience little or no violence in their childhood years. This is an important fact to remember when you're dating—and it's true with all types of abuse—physical, sexual, *and emotional*.

If you don't want to pass on the cycle of abuse to the one you love and eventually to your children, make sure the pain from a damaged childhood has been healed. The hurt you suffered in childhood needs to be dealt with and forgiven, and new, healthy patterns of behavior (which include healthy boundaries) must be learned. Ask anyone who has suffered abuse in a marriage, and

How do you know if you're being abused?

If you look in the mirror and see that your face is bruised and swollen because of what your partner did, you know that you have been abused. But abuse is more than physical. It may come in other forms that are not so visible.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you feel as if you're walking on eggshells to keep the peace?
- Do you feel like a prisoner locked in your own home?
- Does your partner monitor your actions and time, making you account for every minute?
- Do you feel forced to have sex when you don't want to?
- Does your partner call you names or verbally threaten you?
- Is your partner violent with children, property, or pets?
- Do you feel powerless to make your own choices, have your own opinions, or come and go as you please?
- Does your partner make all the money decisions, deny you access to money, or make you account for every penny?
- Does your partner humiliate you through actions or words, privately or in front of others?
- Does your partner frequently accuse you of having affairs?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, it is likely that you are in an abusive situation.³

that person will tell you, it's worth putting off a wedding for a year or two to make sure the virus of abuse won't get passed on. If abuse occurs while dating, cut off the relationship immediately. Let your boundary be, "I will not tolerate this behavior." If abuse occurs during courtship, it **will** get worse after marriage. And that's a fact!

Both men and women can be guilty of abuse. But within marriage, men are more frequently the physical abusers and women the victims, leading to the need for shelters and special services for abused wives.

From the studies on battered women, a profile has been compiled. As you read the following characteristics, notice how many traits have to do with the inability of women to set appropriate boundaries against men who haven't established boundaries for themselves. It's no wonder there are so many "head-on collisions" in marriage!

1. Accepts male dominance and the myth of male superiority; equates dominance with masculinity.
2. Is passive and placating; easily dominated.
3. Feels she has no basic human rights—often not even the right not to be hit. She may feel that "it's a man's right to strike his wife and children."
4. Accepts guilt even where there has been no wrongdoing: "I must have done something to deserve this."
5. Accepts her partner's view of reality and what he says.
6. Feels that she must help her mate: "This man needs me."
7. Acts as a buffer between her partner

and the rest of the world. Makes excuses for him: "He was drunk when he did it."

8. Has strong needs to be needed; is emotionally and physically dependent on her abuser.
9. Underestimates or downplays the dangerousness of her situation. Denies her terror and her anger.
10. Has unshakable faith that things will improve: "He will change." Or feels that there is absolutely nothing she can do about her situation.
11. Bases her feelings of self-worth on her ability to "catch" and hold a man.
12. Fears divorce and doubts her ability to make it on her own.
13. Is economically dependent on her abuser.
14. Uses sex to establish intimacy.
15. Suffers low self-esteem.
16. Doubts her own sanity.
17. Suffers from depression and severe stress reactions with psychosomatic complaints.
18. Is more likely to be young and pregnant than is a nonabused woman.⁴

It is estimated that half of all women at some time in their lives will be battered by a man who also "loves" her. And it occurs among all races, religions, ethnic groups, and educational levels. A significant percentage of emergency admissions are for women who have been battered! The sad fact is, according to the Centers for Disease Control, a woman is in nine times more danger of violent attack in her own home than on the streets. All this because neither partner

has learned to keep within the lines of healthy relationships.

Power and control are major factors in domestic violence. Abusive men (and sometimes women) cross the line when they use, or threaten, physical violence in order to get power and control. Their mates then become victims, enduring the abuse because they are afraid of getting hurt if they set boundaries. The result is that these destructive patterns of behavior, if not dealt with, are passed on from one generation to another.

Uncontrolled emotions, especially anger, are like the car that swerves over the line into your lane. When this happens in a relationship, you have two choices. One, to get

hit and let someone else's uncontrolled emotion control you—causing you to **react** with your own set of uncontrolled emotions, whether it be anger, jealousy, fear, or depression. Or you can learn to set your own boundaries and be **proactive**—choosing a rationally controlled response.

When you were a child, you were not able to do this easily. The cerebral cortex part of your brain (the thinking, logical, analytic center) was not developed sufficiently for you to readily access it and therefore be able to proact rationally. So you reacted impulsively from the limbic (or emotional) system in your brain. The Bible says that as we grow, we are to put away childish things (see 1 Corinthians 13:11), and one of these childish things is our uncontrolled emotional reactions triggered by the limbic system that keeps us from acting in a loving manner.

By the age of accountability, or around twelve, the cerebral cortex is developed enough to be able to consistently control impulsive and irrational emotions. It's interesting that it was when Jesus was twelve years of age, an incident arose in His life where He could have easily reacted out of His impulsive limbic system, but He didn't. Here's the story: The family had gone to Jerusalem for a religious festival, and Mary and Joseph had started back home. A day later they had a conversation that probably went something like this:

"Jesus is with you, isn't He, Mary?"

"Of course not," Mary replies. "He's a man now. He's with you and the other men, right?"

Unto the third and fourth generations

"Apart from God's grace, a damaged family is injured for generations to come. Destroyed marriages and hurt children produce a progeny of discouraged offspring which beget the same and worse. Max Jukes was a no-good horse thief, married to a woman of like kind. From their loins came 310 professional vagrants, 440 lives wrecked by debauchery, 130 prisoners, 7 murderers, 100 alcoholics, 60 habitual thieves, and 190 public prostitutes. It is no wonder Andrew Murray said a hundred years ago that 'The family is Satan's greatest stronghold.'

"A marriage built on godly principles will strengthen generations yet unborn. Unlike Max Jukes, the offspring of the great preacher, Jonathan Edwards, include 13 college presidents, 65 professors, 100 lawyers and a dean of a law school, 30 judges, 66 physicians, 80 public officers, 3 US Senators, 3 mayors of large cities, 3 governors, 1 controller of the US treasury and 1 Vice President of the U.S. (Study done by A. E. Winship.)

"Strong churches, communities, and countries do not make strong families; rather, strong families make strong churches, communities, and countries."⁵

"No," answered Joseph. "I thought He was with you."

Can't you just imagine the barbs flying at this moment! This good Jewish couple had not just lost their Son, but they had lost God's Son! Terror must have gripped their hearts as they spent that next two days traveling back to Jerusalem and searching for Him, wondering if Jesus had been kidnapped, sold as a slave, or killed.

They were angry that Jesus hadn't followed them as they presumed He would when they left Jerusalem with their friends. They were embarrassed as they imagined what their friends thought of them having left their son behind.

With this turmoil of uncontrolled emotions raging in her, Mary finally spotted Jesus in the temple, and

rushed up to Him. "Young man," she says, "why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you" (Luke 2:48, The Message).

Now, from a parent's point of view, that's not such an unreasonable comment. But what about from a twelve-year-old's perspective? How do you think Jesus felt, having His mother scold Him like that when He had done nothing wrong?

Instead of answering with blame, "Mother! What's the matter with you? I've been here all the time. You and Dad were

the ones who left!" Jesus kept it between the lines and essentially said, "Mom, from the time I was a little boy you've been telling me who I was. Didn't you know that I had

to be here, dealing with the things of My Father?"

Boundaries are what help you choose your responses and be proactive as Jesus was, and not reactive, hurting others as you have been hurt! But here's the catch! If a stimulus evokes any memory from childhood that has emotional pain attached to it, that memory (even though subconscious) will short-circuit the pathway from the brain's limbic system to the cerebral cortex. Chances are, regardless of your age, you'll react from the limbic system as if you were about the same age as when the painful memory was recorded. Psychology calls this behavior your adult/child.

The only way to consistently think rationally before acting is to get rid of the pain from the past. You may have been neglected, disciplined inappropriately, put-down, or physically or sexually abused. To keep it between the lines, you need to figure out what triggers your emotional (limbic system) reaction and ask for divine help to let go of the bitterness and rage that controls you. In other words, you need to forgive. Forgiveness is what tags the emotionally painful files in your brain, "Completed!" Forgiveness is what dilutes and finally

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Second, fill your mind (your cerebral cortex) with healthy boundary-setting directives from the Bible, such as "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). Jesus used this method all His life. When He was tempted to act impulsively, He said, "It is written. . . ." And you can say that too!

One of the most effective "It is written" statements that has to do with anger management is, " 'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26). A paraphrase might be, "Admit that you're angry, but don't react in a way that hurts others and breaks relationships. Instead, reconcile as soon as possible."

You've heard it—or maybe you've said it,

"I couldn't help it! He made me so angry, I had to get back at him." This statement is not true. No one **makes** you act out your anger. God has designed your body to experience emotion, but as a young adult, what you do immediately after the emotion is a choice of your brain. Using different words may be helpful to explain this distinction. An **emotion** is what hits you; a **feeling** is what you choose to hold on to. You own your own feelings. Feelings are never the other person's fault. Saying "I couldn't help it" is really saying, "I chose to not help it."

Anger is not like a mechanical trigger that fires a physical or verbal bullet in response to pressure. Rather, it is an energy that you can choose to channel into many different forms of action. Some of these actions may be impulsive and destructive to others (violence) or to self (guilt), but anger can also give you the energy to set boundaries, clarify misunderstandings, and stand up for truth.

"There is a sacred circle around every family which should be preserved. No other one has any right in that sacred circle. The husband and wife should be all to each other. The wife should have no secrets to keep from her husband and let others know, and the husband should have no secrets to keep from his wife to relate to others. The heart of his wife should be the grave for the faults of the husband, and the heart of the husband should be the grave for his wife's faults. Never should either party indulge in a joke at the expense of the other's feelings. Never should either the husband or wife in sport or in any other manner complain of each other to others, for frequently indulging in this foolish and what may seem perfectly harmless joking will end in trial with each other and perhaps estrangement. I have been shown that there should be a sacred shield around every family.

"The home circle should be regarded as a sacred place, a symbol of heaven, a mirror in which to reflect ourselves. Friends and acquaintances we may have, but in the home life they are not to meddle. A strong sense of proprietorship should be felt, giving a sense of ease, restfulness, trust."⁶

Affair-proofing a Marriage

One of the most important boundaries in marriage is the sexual commitment to a spouse. Strong boundaries affair-proof a marriage. Few wake up one day and decide, I'm going to have an affair! Instead, an affair is the result of not keeping the marital boundaries healthy on a day-by-day basis. Here's vital information to affair-proof a marriage.

1. An affair doesn't have to involve physical sex. Jesus made it clear that "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Couples should guard what they look at and what they think about—which means avoiding the temptation to view pornography from whatever source.
2. Affairs rarely develop when the basic needs of a husband and wife are being met within a marriage. But life gets busy, and if they aren't careful, a couple tends to take each other for granted instead of continuing the little acts of love. Before the couple realizes what is happening, someone outside the marriage may begin meeting some of those needs, like really listening or being fun to be with. Husbands and wives need to realize that if they allow someone other than their spouse to meet their emotional needs, they will be drawn to that person like a magnet.
3. If a man will lovingly meet the emotional needs of his wife, her natural tendency is to meet his sexual needs. Affairs can innocently start this same way: a man meets the emotional needs of *another* woman; her natural impulse is to meet his sexual

needs, while he unconsciously thinks he deserves it. Thus an affair is born.

In summary, if you want a strong, vibrant, and healthy marriage, you must learn to "keep it between the lines." There is no better time to start practicing healthy boundaries than now, as you begin the dating process.

Anchor Text

"In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

Bible Search

1. To learn more about Bible boundaries for healthy relationships, complete the worksheet provided by your teacher.
2. Complete the worksheet provided by your teacher to learn more about Bible boundaries against adultery.
3. **A fresh look at Paul's advice about sex**
Read 1 Corinthians 7 from *The Message* and write a paragraph recording the new and interesting insights that you got from the chapter about sexual boundaries.

Endnotes

1. "Keep It Between the Lines," sung by Ricky Van Shelton on the album *Ricky Van Shelton Greatest Hits Plus*, Columbia Records, 1992.
2. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 72, 73.
3. Lisa Pohlman, Seek Frazee, Merrill Cousin, and the Maine Coalition for Family Crisis Services, *Information Guide for Abused Women in Maine*, American Association of University Women in Augusta, Me., 1988.
4. F. Philip Rice, *Intimate Relationships, Marriages, and Families* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1993), 453.
5. Dr. Marlin Howe, "The Family Is Important to God," *Pulpit Helps*, September 1994, 8.
6. Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952), 177.

Reaction

Discussion Questions

1. How can emotional boundaries keep you out of trouble?
2. How can serving others, which is a positive thing to do, end up being something negative?
3. Why do we hear so much more about battered wives than we hear about battered husbands?
4. How can you be sure when you date or get married that you won't end up being a victim of abuse?
5. There is no such thing as a marriage that isn't vulnerable to an affair. Do you agree or disagree?

Personal Response

1. Do you have difficulty controlling your emotions? When someone dumps on you, do you end up feeling angry, depressed, or hurt? Is there something that someone does that really bugs you, and you impulsively respond with anger? If so, what do you think may be causing you to react impulsively from your limbic system, rather than using your cerebral cortex to choose a more appropriate response? What can you do to get better control of your emotions?
2. Responding with "It is written..." think of a specific incident that happens on a fairly regular basis to which you respond negatively. What Bible boundary could you put in your cerebral cortex to help you react more rationally? Commit to trying this for a month and see if it makes a difference.

Practical Application

1. Emotional Reactions

Why not do some brain-system analysis on your friends? Your friends express their emotions many times during the day. Now that you understand how the brain functions and how impulsive reactions stem from the limbic system and rational choices of action come from the cerebral cortex, keep your journal handy and analyze how some of your friends respond to emotional situations. Did they react impulsively? Or did they proact, choosing a rational, appropriate response?

Your task is to record three incidents of an emotional reaction. Be sure each incident has the following:

- A. The situation or behavior that impacted the person.
- B. What you would expect the impulsive emotional response to be by most individuals.
- C. What response did your friend have to this incident? Do you feel it was limbic-based or cerebral cortex-based? Why?

2. Jesus' Pattern

Analyze the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-42.

- A. Why do you think Jesus said what He did?
- B. What does this have to do with power and control? (Hint: If you choose to turn the other cheek or go the second mile, who is then in control?)
- C. If Jesus were speaking to your school or family today, what directive based on this same principle might He give?