



*Boundaries*

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*Part One*

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# **What Are Boundaries?**

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Chapter 1

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## A Day in a Boundaryless Life

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### 6:00 A.M.

The alarm jangled. Bleary-eyed from too little sleep, Sherrie shut off the noisy intruder, turned on the bedside lamp, and sat up in bed. Looking blankly at the wall, she tried to get her bearings.

*Why am I dreading this day? Lord, didn't you promise me a life of joy?*

Then, as the cobwebs left her mind, Sherrie remembered the reason for her dread: the four-o'clock meeting with Todd's third-grade teacher. The phone call returned to her memory: "Sherrie, this is Jean Russell. I wonder if we could meet about Todd's performance and his . . . behavior."

Todd couldn't keep still and listen to his teachers. He didn't even listen to Sherrie and Walt. Todd was such a strong-willed child, and she didn't want to quench his spirit. Wasn't that more important?

"Well, no time to worry about all that," Sherrie said to herself, raising her thirty-five-year-old body off the bed and padding to the shower. "I've got enough troubles to keep me busy all day."

Under the shower, Sherrie's mind moved out of first gear. She began mentally ticking off the day's schedule. Todd, nine, and Amy, six, would have been a handful even if she *weren't* a working mother.

“Let’s see . . . fix breakfast, pack two lunches, and finish sewing Amy’s costume for the school play. That will be a trick—finishing sewing the costume before the car pool picks her up at 7:45 A.M.”

Sherrie thought regretfully about last night. She’d planned to work on Amy’s costume then, using her talents to make a special day for her little girl. But her mother had dropped over unexpectedly. Good manners dictated that she play hostess, and another evening was shot. The memories of her attempts to salvage the time weren’t pretty.

Trying to be diplomatic, Sherrie artfully told her mother, “You can’t imagine how much I enjoy your surprise visits, Mom! But I was wondering, would you mind if I sew Amy’s costume while we talk?” Sherrie cringed inwardly, correctly anticipating her mother’s response.

“Sherrie, you know I’d be the last to intrude on your time with your family.” Sherrie’s mother, widowed for twelve years, had elevated her widowhood to the status of martyrdom. “I mean, since your father died, it’s been such an empty time. I still miss our family. How could I deprive you of that for yourself?”

*I’ll bet I find out how,* Sherrie thought to herself.

“That’s why I can understand why you don’t bring Walt and the children to see me much anymore. How could I be entertaining? I’m just a lonely old lady who gave her entire life to her children. Who would want to spend any time with me?”

“No, Mom, no, no, no!” Sherrie quickly joined the emotional minuet she and her mom had been dancing for decades. “That’s not what I meant at all! I mean, it’s so special having you over. Goodness knows, with our schedule, we’d like to visit more, but we just haven’t been able to. That’s why I’m so glad you took the initiative!” *Lord, don’t strike me dead for this little lie,* she prayed silently.

“In fact, I can do the costume any old time,” Sherrie said. *Forgive me for this lie, too.* “Now, why don’t I make us some coffee?”

Her mother sighed. “All right, if you insist. But I’d just hate to think I’m intruding.”

The visit lasted well into the night. By the time her mother left, Sherrie felt absolutely crazy, but she justified it to herself. *At least I've helped make her lonely day a little brighter.* Then a pesky voice piped up. *If you helped so much, why was she still talking about her loneliness when she left?* Trying to ignore the thought, Sherrie went to bed.

### **6:45 A.M.**

Sherrie returned to the present. “No use crying over spilt time, I guess,” she mumbled to herself as she struggled to close the zipper of her black linen skirt. Her favorite suit had become, as many others had, too tight. *Middle-age spread so soon?* she thought. *This week, I really have to go on a diet and start exercising.*

The next hour was, as usual, a disaster. The kids whined about getting out of bed, and Walt complained, “Can’t you get the kids to the table on time?”

### **7:45 A.M.**

Miraculously, the kids made it to their rides, Walt left for work in his car, and Sherrie went out and locked the front door after her. Taking a deep breath, she prayed silently, *Lord, I'm not looking forward to this day. Give me something to hope for.* In her car on the freeway, she finished applying her makeup. *Thank the Lord for traffic jams.*

### **8:45 A.M.**

Rushing into McAllister Enterprises where she worked as a fashion consultant, Sherrie glanced at her watch. Only a few minutes late. Maybe by now her colleagues understood that being late was a way of life for her and did not expect her to be on time.

She was wrong. They'd started the weekly executive meeting without her. Sherrie tried to tiptoe in without being noticed, but every eye was on her as she struggled into her seat. Glancing around,

she gave a fleeting smile and muttered something about “that crazy traffic.”

### **11:59 A.M.**

The rest of Sherrie’s morning proceeded fairly well. A talented fashion designer, Sherrie had an unerring eye for attractive clothing and was a valuable asset to McAllister. The only hitch came just before lunch.

Her extension rang. “Sherrie Phillips.”

“Sherrie, thank goodness you’re there! I don’t know what I’d have done if you’d been at lunch!” There was no mistaking this voice. Sherrie had known Lois Thompson since grade school. A high-strung woman, Lois was always in crisis. Sherrie had always tried to make herself available to Lois, to “be there for her.” But Lois never asked Sherrie how she was doing, and when Sherrie mentioned her struggles, Lois either changed the subject or had to leave.

Sherrie genuinely loved Lois and was concerned about her problems, but Lois seemed more like a client than a friend. Sherrie resented the imbalance in their friendship. As always, Sherrie felt guilty when she thought about her anger at Lois. As a Christian, she knew the value the Bible placed on loving and helping others. *There I go again*, she would say to herself. *Thinking of myself before others. Please, Lord, let me give to Lois freely and not be so self-centered.*

Sherrie asked, “What’s the matter, Lois?”

“It’s horrible, just horrible,” Lois said. “Anne was sent home from school today, Tom was denied his promotion, and my car gave out on the freeway!”

*This is what my life’s like every day!* Sherrie thought to herself, feeling the resentment rising. However, she merely said, “Lois, you poor thing! How are you coping with all of this?”

Lois was happy to answer Sherrie’s question in great detail—so much detail that Sherrie missed half her lunch break consoling her friend. *Well*, she thought, *fast food’s better than no food.*

Sitting at the drive-through waiting for her chicken burger, Sherrie thought about Lois. *If all my listening, consoling, and advice had made any difference over the years, maybe it would be worth it. But Lois makes the same mistakes now that she made twenty years ago. Why do I do this to myself?*

#### **4:00 P.M.**

Sherrie's afternoon passed uneventfully. She was on the way out of the office to the teacher's meeting when her boss, Jeff Moreland, flagged her down.

"Glad I caught up with you, Sherrie," he said. A successful figure at MacAllister Enterprises, Jeff made things happen. Trouble was, Jeff often used other people to "make things happen." Sherrie could sense the hundredth verse of the same old song tuning up again. "Listen, I'm in a time crunch," he said, handing her a large sheaf of papers. "This is the data for the final recommendations for the Kimbrough account. All it needs is a little writing and editing. And it's due tomorrow. But I'm sure it'll be no problem for you." He smiled ingratiatingly.

Sherrie panicked. Jeff's "editing" needs were legendary. Hefting the papers in her hands, Sherrie saw a minimum of five hours' work. *I had this data in to him three weeks ago!* she thought furiously. *Where does this man get off having me save his face for his deadline?*

Quickly she composed herself. "Sure, Jeff. It's no problem at all. Glad I can help. What time do you need it?"

"Nine o'clock would be fine. And ... thanks, Sherrie. I always think of you first when I'm in a jam. You're so dependable." Jeff strolled away.

*Dependable ... faithful ... reliable*, Sherrie thought. *I've always been described this way by people who wanted something from me. Sounds like a description of a good mule.* Suddenly the guilt hit again. *There I am, getting resentful again. Lord, help me "bloom where I'm planted."* But secretly she found herself wishing she could be transplanted to another flowerpot.

**4:30 p.m.**

Jean Russell was a competent teacher, one of many in the profession who understood the complex factors beneath a child's problem behavior. The meeting with Todd's teacher began as so many before, minus Walt. Todd's father hadn't been able to get off work, so the two women talked alone.

"He's not a bad child, Sherrie," Mrs. Russell reassured her. "Todd is a bright, energetic boy. When he minds, he's one of the most enjoyable kids in the class."

Sherrie waited for the ax to fall. *Just get to the point, Jean. I have a "problem child," don't I? What's new? I have a "problem life" to go with it.*

Sensing Sherrie's discomfort, the teacher pressed ahead. "The problem is that Todd doesn't respond well to limits. For example, during our task period, when children work on assignments, Todd has great difficulty. He gets up from his desk, pesters other kids, and won't stop talking. When I mention to him that his behavior is inappropriate, he becomes enraged and obstinate."

Sherrie felt defensive about her only son. "Maybe Todd has an attention-deficit problem, or he's hyperactive?"

Mrs. Russell shook her head. "When Todd's second-grade teacher wondered about that last year, psychological testing ruled that out. Todd stays on task very well when he's interested in the subject. I'm no therapist, but it seems to me that he's just not used to responding to rules."

Now Sherrie's defensiveness turned from Todd to herself. "Are you saying this is some sort of home problem?"

Mrs. Russell looked uncomfortable. "As I said, I'm not a counselor. I just know that in third grade, most children resist rules. But Todd is off the scale. Any time I tell him to do something he doesn't want to it's World War III. And since all his intellectual and cognitive testing comes out normal, I was just wondering how things were at home?"

Sherrie no longer tried to hold back the tears. She buried her head in her hands and wept convulsively for a few minutes, feeling overwhelmed with everything.

Eventually, her crying subsided. “I’m sorry . . . I guess this just hit on a bad day.” Sherrie rummaged in her purse for a tissue. “No, no, it’s more than that. Jean, I need to be honest with you. Your problems with him are the same as mine. Walt and I have a real struggle making Todd mind at home. When we’re playing or talking, Todd is the most wonderful son I could imagine. But any time I have to discipline him, the tantrums are more than I can handle. So I guess I don’t have any solutions for you.”

Jean nodded her head slowly. “It really helps me, Sherrie, to know that Todd’s behavior is a problem at home, too. At least now we can put our heads together on a solution.”

### **5:15 P.M.**

Sherrie felt strangely grateful for the afternoon rush-hour traffic. *At least there’s no one tugging on me here*, she thought. She used the time to plan around her next crises: kids, dinner, Jeff’s project, church, . . . and Walt.

### **6:30 P.M.**

“For the fourth and last time, dinner’s ready!” Sherrie hated to scream, but what else worked? The kids and Walt always seemed to shuffle in whenever they felt like it. More often than not, dinner was cold by the time everyone was assembled.

Sherrie had no clue what the problem was. She knew it wasn’t the food, because she was a good cook. Besides, once they got to the table, everyone inhaled it in seconds.

Everyone but Amy. Watching her daughter sit silently, picking distractedly at her food, Sherrie again felt uneasy. Amy was such a loveable, sensitive child. Why was she so reserved? Amy had never been outgoing. She preferred to spend her time reading, painting, or just sitting in her bedroom “thinking about stuff.”

“Honey, what kind of stuff?” Sherrie would probe.

“Just stuff,” would be the usual reply. Sherrie felt shut out of her daughter’s life. She dreamed of mother-daughter talks, conversations

for “just us girls,” shopping trips. But Amy had a secret place deep inside where no one was ever invited. This unreachable part of her daughter’s heart Sherrie ached to touch.

### **7:00 P.M.**

Halfway through dinner, the phone rang. *We really need to get an answering machine to handle calls during dinner*, Sherrie thought. *There’s precious little time for us to be together as a family anymore.* Then, as if on cue, another familiar thought struck her. *It might be someone who needs me.*

As always, Sherrie listened to the second voice in her head and jumped up from the table to answer the phone. Her heart sank as she recognized the voice on the other end.

“Hope I’m not disturbing anything,” said Phyllis Renfrow, the women’s ministries leader at church.

“Certainly you aren’t disturbing anything,” Sherrie lied again.

“Sherrie, I’m in deep water,” Phyllis said. “Margie was going to be our activities coordinator at the retreat, and now she’s cancelled. Something about “priorities at home.” Any way you can pitch in?”

The retreat. Sherrie had almost forgotten that the annual gathering of church women was this weekend. She had actually been looking forward to leaving the kids and Walt behind and strolling around the beautiful mountainous area for two days, just herself and the Lord. In fact, the possibility of solitude felt better to her than the planned group activities. Taking on Margie’s activities coordinator position would mean giving up her precious alone time. No, it wouldn’t work. Sherrie would just have to say...

Automatically, the second thought pattern intervened. *What a privilege to serve God and these women, Sherrie! By giving up a little portion of your life, by letting go of your selfishness, you can make a big difference in some lives. Think it over.*

Sherrie didn’t have to think it over. She’d learned to respond unquestioningly to this familiar voice, just as she responded to her mother’s, and Phyllis’s, and maybe God’s, too. Whoever it belonged to, it was too strong to be ignored. Habit won out.

“I’ll be happy to help,” Sherrie told Phyllis. “Just send me whatever Margie’s done, and I’ll get working on it.”

Phyllis sighed, audibly relieved. “Sherrie, I know it’s a sacrifice. Myself, I have to do it several times, every day. But that’s the abundant Christian life, isn’t it? Being living sacrifices.”

*If you say so*, thought Sherrie. But she couldn’t help wondering when the “abundant” part would come in.

### **7:45 P.M.**

Dinner finally finished, Sherrie watched Walt position himself in front of the TV for the football game. Todd reached for the phone, asking if his friends could come over and play. Amy slipped unobserved to her room.

The dishes stayed on the table. The family hadn’t quite gotten the hang of helping clean up yet. But maybe the kids were still a little young for that. Sherrie started clearing the dishes from the table.

### **11:30 P.M.**

Years ago, Sherrie could have cleaned up after dinner, gotten the kids to bed on time, and performed Jeff’s handed-off project with ease. A cup of coffee after dinner and the adrenaline rush that accompanied crises and deadlines galvanized Sherrie into superhuman feats of productivity. She wasn’t called “Super Sherrie” for nothing!

But it was becoming noticeably harder these days. Stress didn’t work like it used to. More and more, she was having trouble concentrating, forgetting dates and deadlines, and not even caring a great deal about it all.

At any rate, by sheer willpower, she had completed most of her tasks. Maybe Jeff’s project had suffered a little in quality, but she felt too resentful to feel bad. *But I did say yes to Jeff*, Sherrie thought. *It’s not his fault, it’s mine. Why couldn’t I tell him how unfair it was for him to lay this on me?*

No time for that now. She had to get on with her real task for the evening: her talk with Walt.

Her and Walt's courtship and early marriage had been pleasant. Where she'd been confused, Walt had been decisive. Where she'd felt insecure, he'd been strong. Not that Sherrie wasn't contributing to the marriage. She saw Walt's lack of emotional connectedness, and she had taken upon herself the job of providing the warmth and love the relationship lacked. *God has put together a good team*, she would tell herself. *Walt has the leadership, and I have the love*. This would help her get over the lonely times when he couldn't seem to understand her hurt feelings.

But over the years, Sherrie noted a shift in the relationship. It started off subtly, then became more pronounced. She could hear it in his sarcastic tone when she had a complaint. She saw it in the lack of respect in his eyes when she tried to tell him about her need for more support from him. She felt it in his increasingly insistent demands for her to do things his way.

And his temper. Maybe it was job stress, or having kids. Whatever it was, Sherrie never dreamed she'd ever hear the cutting, angry words she heard from the lips of the man she'd married. She didn't have to cross him much at all to be subjected to the anger—burnt toast, a checking overdraft, or forgetting to gas up the car—any of these seemed to be enough.

It all pointed to one conclusion: the marriage was no longer a team, if it ever had been one. It was a parent-child relationship, with Sherrie on the wrong end.

At first she thought she was imagining things. *There I go again, looking for trouble when I have a great life*, she told herself. That would help for a while—until Walt's next temper attack. Then her hurt and sadness would tell her the truth her mind wasn't willing to accept.

Finally realizing that Walt was a controlling person, Sherrie took the blame upon herself. *I'd be that way, too, if I had a basket case like me to live with*, she'd think. I'm the reason he gets so critical and frustrated.

These conclusions led Sherrie to a solution she had practiced for years: "Loving Walt Out of His Anger." This remedy went something like this: first, Sherrie learned to read Walt's emotions

by watching his temper, body language, and speech. She became exquisitely aware of his moods, and especially sensitive to things that could set him off: lateness, disagreements, and her own anger. As long as she was quiet and agreeable, things went well. But let her preferences raise their ugly heads and she risked getting her head lopped off.

Sherrie learned to read Walt well, and quickly. After sensing that she was crossing an emotional line, she would employ Stage Two of “Loving Walt”: She did an immediate backtrack. Coming around to his viewpoint (but not really), quietly holding her tongue, or even outrightly apologizing for being “hard to live with” all helped.

Stage Three of “Loving Walt” was doing special things for him to show that she was sincere. This might mean dressing more attractively at home. Or making his favorite meals several times a week. Didn’t the Bible talk about being this kind of wife?

The three steps of “Loving Walt” worked for a time. But the peace never lasted. The problem with “Loving Walt Out of His Anger” was that Sherrie was dead tired of trying to soothe Walt out of his tantrums. Thus, he stayed angry longer, and his anger isolated her more from him.

Her love for her husband was eroding. She had felt that no matter how bad things were, God had joined them and that their love would get them through. But, in the past few years, it was more commitment than love. When she was honest, she admitted that many times she could feel nothing at all toward Walt but resentment and fear.

And that’s what tonight was all about. Things needed to change. Somehow, they needed to rekindle the flames of their first love.

Sherrie walked into the family room. The late-night comedian on the television screen had just finished his monologue. “Honey, can we talk?” she asked tentatively.

There was no answer. Moving closer, she saw why. Walt had fallen asleep on the couch. Thinking about waking Walt up, she remembered his stinging words the last time she’d been so “insensitive.” She turned off the television and lights and walked to the empty bedroom.

**11:50 P.M.**

Lying in bed, Sherrie couldn't tell which was greater, her loneliness or her exhaustion. Deciding it was the first, she picked up her Bible from the bedside table and opened it to the New Testament. *Give me something to hope for, Lord. Please*, she prayed silently. Her eyes fell to the words of Christ in Matthew 5:3–5:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

*But Lord, I already feel like that!* Sherrie protested. *I feel poor in spirit. I mourn over my life, my marriage, my children. I try to be gentle, but I just feel run over all the time. Where is your promise? Where is your hope? Where are you?*

Sherrie waited in the darkened room for an answer. None came. The only sound was the quiet pit-pat of tears running off her checks and onto the pages of her Bible.

**What's the Problem?**

Sherrie tries to live her life the right way. She tries to do a good job with her marriage, her children, her job, her relationships, and her Lord. Yet it's obvious that something isn't right. Life isn't working. Sherrie's in deep spiritual and emotional pain.

Woman or man, we can all identify with Sherrie's dilemma—her isolation, her helplessness, her confusion, her guilt. And, above all, her sense that her life is out of control.

Look closely at Sherrie's circumstances. Parts of Sherrie's life may be remarkably similar to your own. Understanding her struggle may shed light on yours. You can immediately see a few answers that *don't* work for Sherrie.

First, *trying harder isn't working*. Sherrie expends lots of energy trying to have a successful life. She isn't lazy. Second, *being nice out of fear isn't working*. Sherrie's people-pleasing efforts don't seem to bring her the intimacy she needs. Third, *taking responsibility for*

*others isn't working.* A master of taking care of the feelings and problems of others, Sherrie feels like her life is a miserable failure. Sherrie's unproductive energy, fearful niceness, and overresponsibility point to the core problem: *Sherrie suffers from severe difficulties in taking ownership of her life.*

Back in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve about ownership: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28).

Made in the image of God, we were created to take responsibility for certain tasks. Part of taking responsibility, or ownership, is knowing what *is* our job, and what *isn't*. Workers who continually take on duties that aren't theirs will eventually burn out. It takes wisdom to know what we should be doing and what we shouldn't. We can't do everything.

Sherrie has great difficulty in knowing what things *are* her responsibility and what *aren't*. In her desire to do the right thing, or to avoid conflict, she ends up taking on problems that God never intended her to take on: her mother's chronic loneliness, her boss's irresponsibility, her friend's unending crises, her church leader's guilt-ridden message of self-sacrifice, and her husband's immaturity.

And her problems don't end there. Sherrie's inability to say no has significantly affected her son's ability to delay gratification and behave himself in school, and, in some way, this inability may be driving her daughter to withdraw.

Any confusion of responsibility and ownership in our lives is a problem of *boundaries*. Just as homeowners set physical property lines around their land, we need to set mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for our lives to help us distinguish what is our responsibility and what isn't. As we see in Sherrie's many struggles, the inability to set appropriate boundaries at appropriate times with the appropriate people can be very destructive.

And this is one of the most serious problems facing Christians today. Many sincere, dedicated believers struggle with tremendous confusion about when it is biblically appropriate to set limits.

When confronted with their lack of boundaries, they raise good questions:

1. Can I set limits and still be a loving person?
2. What are legitimate boundaries?
3. What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries?
4. How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?
5. Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?
6. How do boundaries relate to submission?
7. Aren't boundaries selfish?

Misinformation about the Bible's answers to these issues has led to much wrong teaching about boundaries. Not only that, but many clinical psychological symptoms, such as depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, addictions, impulsive disorders, guilt problems, shame issues, panic disorders, and marital and relational struggles, find their root in conflicts with boundaries.

This book presents a biblical view of boundaries: what they are, what they protect, how they are developed, how they are injured, how to repair them, and how to use them. This book will answer the above questions and more. Our goal is to help you use biblical boundaries appropriately to achieve the relationships and purposes that God intends for you as his child.

Sherrie's knowledge of the Scriptures seems to support her lack of boundaries. This book aims to help you see the deeply biblical nature of boundaries as they operate in the character of God, his universe, and his people.