

Building Better Boundaries

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Date: 12 July 2026

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[0:00] Imagine you're living in your nice home in the suburbs. Most of us live here in Plumstead, or as some people call it, Lower Constantia.!

No walls, no fences, and no one is actually sure where the boundary is. How long do you think you're lost at being good neighbors with them?

Maybe they've got a couple of wild dogs. Maybe you've got a couple of wild kids. How long is the peace going to last when no one knows where the boundary is?

But on the other side of your home, you've got a neighbor, and on his wall are gun turrets and minefields. You might have that in Plumstead, you never know.

It'll be difficult to be good neighbors with them. You'll be too scared to go even near the property.

Difficult to be good neighbors. Either way, if there's no boundaries, or if the boundaries are so well-defined and so well-defended that you don't want to go near them.

[1:30] And sometimes our interpersonal boundaries can be just like those boundaries we've described there. They could either be too low or non-existent, in which case you're going to be easily hurt and easily manipulated.

Or sometimes our boundaries are too well-armed, and we're going to hurt others. So what we want to learn to do is maintain good boundaries that avoid those two extremes.

But why do we have such hard times with maintaining good boundaries with others? Having bad interpersonal boundaries means we struggle with saying no. It means we can be easily manipulated, and it means we're often quick to overreact to perceived threats.

And so today we're going to look at three truths that the Bible gives us that will help us build better boundaries, better interpersonal boundaries with those around us, and so that you can be a better neighbor and better enjoy the neighbors around you, the people around you.

And those three things we're going to look at is we need to identify where the boundary is, we need to build a solid foundation for the boundary that we're going to erect, and once we've erected the boundary, we need to make sure that others know where that boundary is.

[2:49] So those three things we're going to look at one by one. So when you take ownership of a property, the first thing you need to do is identify where the boundary is. So we need to identify where the boundary is.

To have a good working relationship with our neighbor, we need to know where the boundary is so we know whose responsibility is what. When things don't go as we want, we tend to find fault with others and not with ourselves.

When we're doing that, we're moving the boundary so that someone else is in our area of responsibility, so that we can blame them because now they've overstepped this arbitrary boundary line that no one knows about, and then we can blame them.

And this is exactly what we see happening between Cain and Abel. So turn with me to Genesis 4 again. I'm just going to read from verse 3 just to remind us of the story.

In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord, and Abel also brought an offering, fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

[4:01] The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favor. And so here, Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

The Lord said to Cain, But why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door.

It desires to have you, but you must rule over it. Well, Cain displays classic symptoms of people with undefined boundaries.

When God prefers Abel's offerings, Cain doesn't check internally with himself why that might be. He doesn't even take up God's offer when God comes to him and says, Listen, why are you angry? He could have explained to God what he's feeling or what the reason is. Instead, he goes straight to anger and to blame. He thinks it must be either God's fault or Abel's fault.

[5:05] It can't be anything wrong with me. And the problem is that Cain, by doing that, he lets sin into his life. By giving into his feelings, he gives up control of his life.

And by doing that, he gives up his freedoms. It's the same for us, I think. In order to set good boundaries, we need to start with me, not with others.

I simply cannot control how others are going to respond to me. God expects me to control myself, not to control others. We looked at this a little bit in our first talk on boundaries.

And so we need to take ownership of our feelings and our reactions and our responses and not blame others regardless of what they say and do.

Even if they do it on purpose to irritate or frustrate us. Now, we don't know why Abel's offering was accepted and why Cain's wasn't, but I do know this.

[6:05] If Abel was anything like my little brother, he was going to show me how much better his sacrifice was than mine. I don't know if you remember going back to when you were small little kids and you had your siblings around you and they had something that they thought was better than yours.

Look, look, I've got this. You're going to see Abel come. Let's pretend I'm Cain for a second. And Abel is coming along with his sheep to the sacrifice. He's, look, look.

And he's going to show me under my nose, look at my lovely sheep. And there I'm standing with my two little wheat sticks. And he's showing me how clever he is with his sheep and how amazing.

So even if they're showing off, even if they're provoking you, well, I'll tell you what I would have done with my sheaves of wheat at that point. They weren't going to end up in sacrifice, that's for sure.

We're going to end up clobbering Abel. But even if someone is irritating and frustrating us, by letting my feelings control my response, I'm actually really behaving like children because that's what children do.

[7:10] So even if they come and provoke you, losing your cool, getting angry, giving over to your anger, letting sin in and control your feelings, it's really just acting like a child. Adults must act differently.

But if we're all honest, it's difficult, if not impossible, to control our feelings, especially when that flash of anger first arises. And the Bible says actually that without Jesus, we really can't do this in the way that God requires of us at all.

Like Cain, if you don't have Jesus, you're going to find yourself always being led by your feelings.

Even Christians find this difficult to do. And what we do is we allow sin to control our responses, and we don't take the responsibility to change what we can rather than having other people change.

So defining the boundary, knowing where the boundary is, is saying, well, I'm not going to blame you for my emotions. I'm going to take responsibility for my own emotions.

As difficult as that is, I've got to do it with Jesus, and we'll see in a moment how that works. But we've got to stop blaming others as if they're the problem, as if they've walked over the boundary by mistake, and now look where you've trespassed into my area.

[8:34] We need to learn where the boundary is, and then learn to communicate properly. But once you know where the boundary is, the second thing you need to do for good boundary wall is to have a deep and a solid foundation so that your wall is strong and steady.

And so that's the second point about building better boundaries. You've got to lay a solid foundation. You must lay a solid foundation. A strong boundary wall needs a deep, a stable foundation so it doesn't topple over easily when the storms of life and the relationship storms hit it. The Bible teaches that the firmest foundation for healthy boundaries isn't found within ourselves, in our abilities, but in the love that God has given to us in Jesus Christ.

And so, turn with me to Ephesians. We read from Ephesians 4. I'm going to start with Ephesians 3. Before Paul gives instructions about relationships with others, in Ephesians 4, he first grounds believers in their relationship with God, in Ephesians 3.

I'm going to read from verse 16. Paul writes, I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through

faith.

[10:14] And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

And to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Did you pick up those words of power and establishment and strength that we've got by the Holy Spirit and because of God's love?

These are the strongest foundations that anyone can give you. You can't do these kinds of things by yourself. You don't have that kind of ability. Well, it talks about being rooted and established in love.

Roots are among the strongest living anchors in nature. If you've spent any time in your garden digging and laying trenches and trying to put lovely little plants and things and you hit a large root, that thing sometimes feels like stronger than a rock.

It takes a lot of effort to get a root out of the ground and out of the way. Even the small ones and then you hit the big one. It's really hard.

[11:32] Roots are there to keep you. They're almost as immovable as a rock. But roots are also life-giving. And so being rooted in Christ keeps us steady in emotional storms and connects us to the source of life as well as the source of joy as well as the source of acceptance.

And that gives us a far more stable foundation than the fickle love of people. You've got to ask yourself, who am I depending on to give me the love I need?

Am I depending on this God who gives me this deep grounded love that He doesn't remove? Or am I depending on other people to give me something that they might give it small spurts when they can, when they feel like it, but other times they're playing with my emotions even though they might not want to?

That's being rooted in Christ. And it says you're also established in love. That word established refers to laying a solid foundation so that the building above this stone that you've laid there is secure and not easily breached.

Now friends, this is the foundation we need to weather the storms of life, to not be easily manipulated or guilted. When we receive Jesus, we receive His unchanging love and it's like an anchor so that the unpredictable and inconsistent love of other people doesn't shake us so easily.

[13:10] If you've got someone in your life that never confronts you directly but constantly makes snippy and snide remarks, you know, that little cutting little kind of cut you all the time, don't confront you directly, just little things off at the side.

I don't know how you respond. Sometimes you can take it and then you've had a bad day, yes, they really get to you when they say that. Well, if you don't have this solid, deep foundation that Christ loves you and that you don't need to get from them what they're trying to offer, if you don't have that, you're going to find yourself overreacting to even small, snide little remarks very often.

But if your foundation is deep, you've got a deep foundation in Christ, you can respond from a place of strength and stability instead of brittleness. You're not easily, you don't easily overreact, you'll react, but you won't easily overreact.

They make their snide little snippy remarks and they never stop. There's always something that they make a comment about. Well, you can answer calmly and truthfully, well, I'm sorry that you think that's what I'm doing.

I don't think that's what I'm doing. But you can be calm, you can be truthful, because your core identity is not dependent on their affirmation, because you've got this deep foundation in Jesus.

[14:39] You won't be as reactive to others when they attempt to manipulate you or guilt you into doing what they want. You become far less dependent on their emotions for your happiness.

Jesus doesn't guilt us into changing, he loves us into changing. And so you don't need to give into when people put guilt trips on you. You've got this deep foundation that doesn't let you wobble left and right all the time.

But it's not easy, they do that, so what you've got to do, you've got to remind yourself, well, yeah, maybe I am like that, I'm sorry that you feel that way, but you know I'm not like that all the time.

And I don't actually need your, I'm not as needy for your affirmation as I am needy for God's love.

And the cool thing about God's love, you don't have to fight for it.

You don't have to manipulate him into giving you his love. You don't have to earn it. He just loves you like a father loves their children. And so you'll never have true peace in your relationships until you're deeply grounded in the love of Jesus.

[15 : 53] And so if you don't have that in your life, come to him. Ask him for this kind of love. Speak to him. Tell him you want it.

Even if you've got it and you're a Christian, we need it all the time. And so tell him again, Lord, I need that love. I'm missing it. I need to feel it. I need that power you've described here. I'm getting worn down. I'm getting pecked at. I'm being attacked. I'm feeling wobbly. I need your help.

And so keep going to Jesus. And if you've not done that, if you've not come to Jesus before, we've spoken about the Discover Jesus course coming up in August. So join up for that. Come and speak to me.

Sign up on the Connect app and you'll learn how you can get this deep foundation of love and trust that will transform your boundaries with others. Right, so once we've identified our boundaries, once we've laid a solid foundation, we need to build the wall.

[16 : 57] But we need to build the wall in such a way that others know where the boundary is. And the way to do that when it comes to personal boundaries is to use our words, but to use them well.

And so the last point is showing others where the boundary is. Showing others where the boundary is. This part of building better boundaries is all about communication.

Using words well to explain what you will and won't accept and what you want and what you don't want from others. And if you use your words well, you help others respect your boundary without harming them, as well as preserving your own integrity.

I think sometimes we feel that to protect our boundary, we've got to look like that boundary wall with machine guns and land mines. We over-protect our boundary. It's an over-reaction.

We don't need to do that if you're grounded in Christ. You can just say, well, there's the boundary wall. Looks like a normal wall. I need you to respect where it is at the moment. But we need to use our words.

[18 : 06] That's why we need to use our words nicely. Using our words badly at that point, if your wall looks like the wall that's got machine guns and minefields, is you're going to over-react to explain where the boundary is.

Don't you do that! I've told you a million times! And you over-react, you're shouting, you're upset, you're going to say things that you regret that you shouldn't say, and we're not meant to use words like that.

We're not meant to use no words and just be an open, boundaryless place. Oh, I really wish I could say something. I really don't like this, but I mustn't say anything. They invade your boundary. They do stuff you don't like. And instead of protecting yourself by using your words and saying, listen, I don't want that, not shouting, not saying nothing, but saying, hey, this is where the boundary is.

Can you see the balance of what God requires of us, what the difference is? Well, the first thing that Paul highlights for those with their new identity in Christ, it's got this deep foundation, is to talk properly.

[19 : 07] And so we must use words well without manipulation, without shouting, without feeling like you've got to win the argument and say, have the last word, and another thing, and don't you forget this, and blah, blah, blah.

using our words well is about being truthful and open in a way that lets others process in their own time how they'd like to approach and interact with you and your boundary.

For example, if you've got a dispute with your neighbour, how you communicate is often decisive. If you're here in Plumstead, at some point you're going to have a dispute with your neighbour, I'm pretty sure of it.

In fact, everyone does really, it doesn't matter where you live. I can tell you what I have heard in the streets of Plumstead, when one neighbour is fighting with the other.

Jay, are you moe? I'm going to come over there and I'm going to let you know what is going to happen to your future. And you know what? After I'm done, you won't even have one.

[20 : 13] It's that kind of overreaction to being invaded and someone approaching a boundary that you don't like. But you know, I've never heard someone say when they've had that kind of stuff

lobbed at them, you know, you know what?

You're right. I'm so sorry. Let's talk about this in a calm and constructive way. Typically, when you're throwing hand grenades, you get hand grenades thrown back at you. So, how are we to speak to others about our boundaries?

And so, we're in Ephesians 4 now. Verse 25 says this, Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you're still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. I'm going to skip to verse 29.

And do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

[21:44] need to realize that speech is the number one boundary establishing tool. Bad speech always creates unhealthy boundaries.

Bad speech. It says we must put off falsehood and speak truthfully. So not speaking is not an option. You must speak. bad speech is lying, shouting, belittling, throwing sarcastic remarks.

That's not going to help you. They always create unhealthy boundaries. They always create a reaction. Good speech tells the truth in a way that brings people closer together or gives them at least the opportunity of approaching you instead of driving them away.

Here's some examples of how wholesome speech could look. You could use what's called the three strikes and you're out rule.

Three strikes and you're out. So when you're in a conversation and there's abusive language flying, not from you now because your speech is truthful but wholesome.

[22:55] So you can't be throwing rude words out there. If you're going to throw rude words out there, you can't turn on and say don't throw rude words back at me. So if you've controlled your speech but rude words are coming at you, abusive language, use the three strikes and you're out rule.

What's that? Well, you warn about abusive language once, you warn about it twice and if they don't stop, you leave the conversation.

If anyone's worked in a call center or in sales or in customer service, this is one of the first things they teach you about, you know, the customer's not always right.

It sounds something like this. So they're trying to get, I'm trying to help you, they're very upset, and you and this and this and this and your mother this and your dad this and you people that.

Listen, I'm trying to help you. so I'm not over reactive, but I'm not taking it, I'm not quiet here. Listen, please don't speak to me like that. Whether it's swearing or raising your voice or sarcasm, any of the bad speech that we know about, anything that we don't like, please don't speak to me like that.

[24:14] I want to sort this out, but it makes it more difficult when you keep swearing at me. It makes it more difficult when you keep shouting at me. I want to sort it out, but I can't do it if you just have this overflow of stuff coming at me.

If you continue being abusive, I'm going to leave the conversation. Can you stop shouting? Can you stop swearing? What normally happens is they get louder, and they swear more at you because now they've been called out.

It's okay. You're not going to get angry. You've got your foundation in Christ. I don't need your love. I don't need your affirmation. I've got it in Jesus. I'm actually trying to help solve the problem, the situation.

Second warning. Look, I've asked you not to speak like that. If you continue speaking like that, I'm going to leave the conversation. If they continue speaking like that, you leave the conversation.

You just, well, in the olden days, we would slam the phone down, wouldn't we? So it was quite a, wasn't that such a good feeling? And now, they are showing them.

[25:22] It doesn't feel the same. But don't hang up. Don't slam the phone down. You're not leaving in a huff. You're saying, look, we've communicated what I like, what I don't like. You're not respecting my boundary.

I'm going to come back another time when we can do this better. Let's talk another time. And then you, I'm going to leave the conversation out. Bye. Don't continue engaging.

Yeah, but why did you say that? No, you've said what you've said. Do what you say. Jesus says, let your yes be yes and your no be no. If you're going to end the conversation, end it.

Either put the phone down, or if it's in a physical space and it's not on the phone in front of each other, then say, look, I'm not going to continue like this.

I've warned you a few times. Let's talk about this later. They're still gunning at you. We want to have the last word. Forget about the last word. You're going to have the last word later. Okay, thank you so much.

[26 : 20] And you just leave. You know what happens? Every single time, they stop shouting. They might shout until you're out of earshot, but they don't continue shouting.

They stop shouting. They stop swearing. There's no one there to do that to. They want an audience. So turn around, walk away, leave the conversation. Wholesome speech.

Rule number one, use the three strikes and you're out rule. Rule, or here's another thing to use, is to end the current conversation, but not all future interaction.

So if something is happening, they're talking to you in a way that you don't like. We don't say, yeah, but I don't ever want to talk to you again. You've done the same thing a million years.

I don't ever want to hear this again. I don't want to ever talk about this again. You are going to talk to them again. You are going to speak about this thing again.

[27 : 24] So don't say stuff that's not true. Don't over-threaten. You know, one of the rules or principles when you're raising kids is don't over-threaten the discipline.

When we were young, our parents always threatened to rip our arms off and beat us with the wet ends. And like, I'm still waiting. I've still got both my arms. Look, they did do other things that were pretty close to that, I must say, but don't over-threaten and not deliver.

The Bible calls that lying. And it says, don't lie, just speak the truth. Rather, speak the truth in love. So they're coming at you, they're saying things that are hurting you, but you're grounded in Christ.

You're not drawing your sense of worth, your identity from them.

You're drawing your sense of worth and identity from Jesus. Okay, that gives you the space to speak the truth. You know, I'm really hurt by what you're saying.

[28 : 37] It really upsets me. I don't trust myself to be constructive right now. Let's talk about this later when we both calm down a bit.

And I'm going to leave the conversation until we can do that. That's a much better way of dealing with a boundary that's being agitated.

than shouting and swearing and responding back in the same way. But notice that you've given them an out. You haven't said, I don't ever want to speak to you or see you again in my life.

Don't use those words. You are going to see them again in your life. You are going to speak to them again in your life. Give them an out. I don't trust myself to be constructive right now. Let's talk about this later when we both calm down a bit.

You're letting them know that you want to get sorted out and you're going to come back to it, but not when the emotions are up like that, when things are calmer. And you know what? Even if you don't get what you want, you're immediately in control of the conversation and the situation.

[29 : 46] You're immediately in charge. so it's very likely that you will get what you want. If things are really bad, with someone manipulating and guiltting your boundaries, for example, you could be dealing with a professional level narcissist or maybe someone in active addiction.

They are master manipulators. You'll need to put more distance between you and them. Typically, when you're having a conversation, it's going south, it's not going well in your home, with families, you're going to be like, look, let's talk about this later today, when we're both calm.

Let's talk about this later in the week, when we're both calm. But if you're dealing with people that's not your family, but they're really manipulative, they've been doing it for years, even if they are your family, and they're in addiction, because they manipulate and break so many things, you've got to put more distance.

It's not let's sort it out this week. It's going to take weeks, give yourself space, weeks, months, even years. Typically not years, typically it takes some months to sort out some of these problems.

End the current conversation, but don't end all future interaction. At some point we had a family member that was in my family, that was taking drugs and drinking and doing the usual thing.

[31 : 16] And it had been years, and I'd had it. I said, no, if they come, I'm never coming to the family thing when they're there. And my mom would say to keep the door open.

She'd say, keep the gate shut, but keep the door open. They will come back in your life, but only when they can respect your boundaries. So don't say never, just give a future time when they can

respect the boundaries that you've set up.

So three strikes and you're out. End the current conversation, but not all future interaction. And then lastly, give others the same grace that God has given you. When we're building boundary walls, if you're not a builder and you build a wall, it's not going to be the best wall on planet Earth, it's going to be a wall that does something, you know, it's okay.

just like that with building our interpersonal boundaries, if you're not good at it, not used to it, it's going to be a little bit wonky, that's okay.

You're not going to build the perfect boundary wall that never fails or falters, no one does. But they're also not going to have boundaries that are always good. And so give yourself and as well as give others the same grace that God gives you.

[32:36] And you do that by practicing forgiveness because it stops you from holding grudges and wanting revenge. So just the last verse of chapter 4 from verse 32 into the start of chapter 5 there, Paul says, so be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Sometimes we need to make those sacrifices. Our boundaries need to be bendy, if I can put it like that. They mustn't be so hard as to be immovable. It says we must be kind and compassionate to one another in verse 32 there.

One translation has tender hearted. Be tender towards each other. Be soft. Our boundaries must be strong but not unbendable.

Like the wall around your house, our boundaries must be firm and defined but not so intimidating that no one wants to visit us. Jesus wants us to have walls that protect us from being under the control of others but still has a welcome sign outside.

[34:01] If you practice biblical boundaries, you'll have a fence that people can lean over and talk to you and be a neighbor. You can be a good neighbor to them. You can welcome them in. He doesn't want you to have a wall where they're too afraid to come near.

Those are the kinds of boundaries that God wants us to have. We need to help each other and we need to pray to God to ask him to help us. Let me do that. By heavenly father, we look at this topic of boundaries and how it works with people around us, Lord.

We're so quick to blame others and slow to take the responsibility on ourselves. We can only really do that, Lord, if we know that our sins are forgiven and our guilt is taken care of. And so, Lord Jesus, will you do what you tell us in your word to forgive us our sins, to give us this strength, this understanding, that we are rooted and established in your love that can't be taken away.

And then help us, Lord, to use our words well in a way that you would do that, that keeps relationships going for as long as possible.

And so we ask your help in Jesus' name. Amen.