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## Boundaries In Marriage

### A Quick Focus

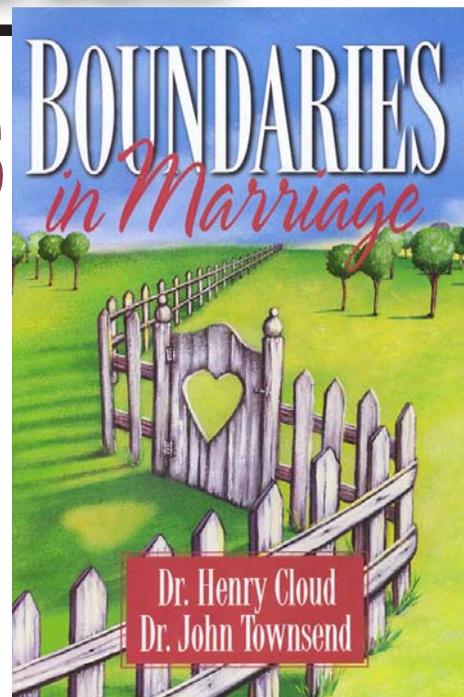
#### The Book's Purpose

- Explain how establishing boundaries is essential for building a healthy marriage
- Teach couples how values form the structure and architecture of marriage
- Offer strategies for dealing with serious violations and betrayals in marriage
- Show how to protect marriage from intruders

#### The Book's Message

Love, freedom, and responsibility are key building blocks of a healthy marriage. By establishing boundaries in a marriage, spouses create a healthy environment in which their love for one another can flourish.

The task of setting boundaries cannot wait until later in marriage. Couples who fail to establish boundaries early in their marriages often discover destructive results later. But spouses who work together to establish boundaries will develop the deep



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level of loving intimacy which is God's intent and design.

Establishing boundaries in marriage is not a method of fixing, punishing, or changing your mate. It is a method of developing self-control.



### Six Main Points

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# WHAT'S A BOUNDARY, ANYWAY?

A boundary is a property line that indicates ownership and responsibility in a relationship.

**When you recognize** that a certain feeling, behavior, or attitude is yours~and not your spouse's~you can take responsibility for it. This is the first step toward changing any problem.

Recognizing that a certain issue is your spouse's responsibility frees you from being victimized by it.

## The Triangles of Boundaries

The marriage relationship is intended by God to be one of joyful intimacy. It is only when freedom, responsibility, and love are present in the marriage that God's purpose for it can be achieved. As we grow in love for God and for one another, we are freed from the slavery of sin, past hurts, and insecurities. As a result, we are able to take more responsibility for our growth. And as we become more responsible, we also become more loving, and the cycle continues.

## The Purpose of Boundaries

In marriage, boundaries serve the same purpose as fences placed around the edge of a piece of prop-

erty. They provide safety for those living within the boundaries, and they give the boundary-setters control over what happens within them. Good boundaries keep evil out and allow the good to come in and stay in~while providing tools for the individuals in the relationship to be self-controlled, not other-controlled. Ultimately, self-control serves and nourishes the love that is being protected by the boundaries.

## Examples of Boundaries

- Words:** Words help to identify to others who you are and what you expect.
- Truth:** Love requires truth. When one partner is not truthful with the other, intimacy is destroyed.
- Consequences:** Consequences identify boundary lines and reveal when they have been crossed.

*"People in denial are deaf to words of truth. They only respond to pain and loss. Consequences show where our boundary line is."*

**4. Emotional Distance:** In a hurtful relationship, one partner may need to distance herself emotionally from her hurtful spouse for the purpose of protection until the errant spouse demonstrates maturity and self-control.

**5. Physical Distance:** In addition to physical safety from abuse, physical distance can provide time to think, to heal, and to learn.

**6. Other People:** The presence of other people can create a safe environment in which to confront potentially emotional problems.

**7. Time:** Time is a tool that can be used wisely and deliberately for solving problems and resolving conflicts.



Boundaries in marriage allow each spouse to take responsibility for:

Feelings	Behaviors	Limits
Thoughts	Talents	Attitudes
Choices	Desires	Values

# The Ten Laws of Boundaries

The following ten laws describe the reality of marriage. Whether or not couples choose to acknowledge them, these laws are operative in marriage. The decision to live within their boundaries or to rebel against them will alter the course of a marriage.

## 1. *The Law of Sowing and Reaping*

Actions have consequences, both for individuals and for those close to them. Allowing a spouse to reap the consequences of his or her actions is a loving way to bring growth to a relationship.

“Refusing to rescue your spouse~such as by refusing to cheer him up when he is pouting, sacrificing to pay off his credit card bill, calling in sick for him when he has been out partying the night before~helps keep the problem with him.”

The spouse who has the problem must face the effects of the problem.

## 2. *The Law of Responsibility*

“We are responsible to each other, but not for each other.”

Each spouse needs to consider the effects his or her actions have on the other partner. We make a dangerous mistake~and perpetuate the problem~when we take responsibility for a spouse's sinful or immature behavior.

## 3. *The Law of Power*

- We do not have power over attitudes and actions of others.
- We do not have the power to change a spouse.
- We do have the power to confess our sinful ways, turn from them, and ask God to help us overcome them.

“Spouses often try to use boundaries to assert power over a mate, and it doesn't work.”

## 4. *The Law of Respect*

Respecting the boundaries of others is necessary if we expect others to respect our boundaries. By respecting and valuing your mate's boundaries, you give your spouse the freedom to love you as God intended.

## 5. *The Law of Motivation*

**“We must be free to say no before we can wholeheartedly say yes. No one can actually love another if he doesn't have the choice not to.”**

If love is to be freely given in marriage, it cannot be coerced. Be vulnerable with your spouse and give your mate time and love. This will ensure that his or her choices will be based on your shared values, not on fear.

## 6. *The Law of Evaluation*

Pleasure and pain, in and of themselves, are not good indicators of the state of a marriage. Some pain is necessary as a symptom of growth. Establishing boundaries can result in pain. If the pain does not lead to injury, it is probably the type of pain that will lead to growth. Accepting and even embracing the pain of growth is a step that will help to build a solid marriage.

## 7. *The Law of Proactivity*

We must be proactive in solving problems based on our values, wants, and needs. Every marriage will have some boundaries that have been set as a reaction to problems that arise, but reactive boundaries

are insufficient for growth. Reactive boundaries must be replaced by proactive boundaries set in place for the purpose of cultivating love, freedom, and responsibility.

## 8. *The Law of Envy*

Envy is the number one obstacle to establishing boundaries in marriage. It is an all-consuming focus on what someone else has, coupled with a resentment against that person for having it while we do not.

“Envy is miserable because we're dissatisfied with our state, yet powerless to change it.”

Envy should not be confused with desire, which motivates us to take action because we want something. Desire focuses on preserving the goodness and the value of what we have.

## 9. *The Law of Activity*

We should be active in learning and setting boundaries.

“Active people make lots of mistakes, and wise ones grow from them (Hebrews 5:14) ...Passive people have trouble learning because they are afraid to take risks. Because of this, they also have a harder time taking charge of their lives and boundaries.”

You should always be willing to take the first step toward change. Don't wait for your spouse to change first.

## 10. *The Law of Exposure*

We should always communicate our boundaries to each other. Failure to do so prevents true intimacy from developing in a marriage.

“A boundary that is not communicated is a boundary that is not working.”

# Setting Boundaries On Yourself

**Often, when** problems arise in a relationship, we face the temptation to blame our partner, but such blame-shifting is usually a futile oversimplification of the real problem. But when we decide to stop blaming our spouse and own the problem as our own, we are then in a position to make the necessary changes.

It is rare that a problem in a marriage is wholly the fault of one spouse. Usually, both husband and wife have some responsibility for the difficulty. Consequently, the "innocent" spouse needs to consider what part he or she plays in the problem. Then he or she must take an active role in working toward a solution. The "innocent" spouse must resist the temptation to dwell on the other partner's problems, to feel victimized by the relationship, or to be judgmental of the spouse.

We are often tempted to believe that our primary task in marriage is to "fix" or control a spouse.

But God's design for marriage hinges on each partner's commitment to submit to Him and His principles. Each partner must be concerned about correcting his own shortcomings—not his spouse's.

**"You are responsible for half of your marriage and all of your soul."**

Setting boundaries on your own character weaknesses is a loving thing to do for your spouse since it creates an environment in which your spouse is free to mature. As you grow in relationship to God, you will become more empathetic and supportive toward your spouse, encouraging her by your love.

Above all, set boundaries on your attempts to control your spouse. If you do not respect your spouse's disagreements with you, if you punish your spouse for choosing differently than you, or if you do not value your spouse's freedom, then it is likely you are try-

ing to control your spouse. Spouses seek to control one another in many ways—using guilt, anger, or assaults on boundaries to coerce from the other partner the decision or behavior that is desired.

If you are attempting to control your spouse, these steps will help you establish boundaries:

- Realize the cost of your control. You may be losing your spouse's love and intimacy.
- Ask your spouse to let you know how your control affects him or her.
- Recognize that you are helpless to change your spouse.
- Learn to accept and let go of what you cannot change; grieve if necessary.
- Work through dependency issues, and make sure that your spouse is not the only person who can meet all of your emotional needs.
- Find your identity in yourself, not in your spouse—so disagreements will not be seen as personal attacks.
- Value your spouse's freedom as you would want your freedom valued.
- Set boundaries with your spouse instead of controlling him or her.



# It Takes Two to Make One

**Marriage is intended** by God as a union of two complete persons. It is only when two mature and whole individuals come together in marriage that their union will be complete. Marriage is not designed to be a shortcut to maturity, a way of completing yourself. Rather, God designed marriage as a way for two distinct people to come together and create something bigger and better than either one could achieve individually. Spouses should complement one another, not complete one another.

**"A marriage made in Heaven is one where a man and a woman become more richly themselves together than the chances are either of them could ever have managed to become alone."**

~Frederick Buechner

A mature, complete adult will take responsibility for himself or

herself, and will expect the same from those that he or she loves. This requires honesty and a willingness to confront areas of immaturity.

## Valuing the Treasure of Your Spouse's Soul

As a mature person, you should value your spouse's feelings, attitudes, perspectives, and talents, seeking in everything you do to nurture, develop, and take care of those precious aspects of the one you love.

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You must recognize that your spouse is not an extension of yourself; you need to give him or her permission to exist and grow as an individual:

1. See your spouse as a person, not as an object whose only importance consists in meeting your needs.
2. Allow your spouse to have his or her own experience, joining in it, identifying with it, understanding it, being empathetic with it.
3. Allow your spouse the freedom to be different from you. Value your spouse's differences and treat them with respect. Embrace the differences between you and your spouse as the material out of which love grows.
4. Cherish your spouse's existence. Appreciate your partner for who he or she is, apart from what you get from him or her.

## Guarding Freedom

Humans were created by God to become independent from their parents and to be free. If you are controlling your spouse, you are interfering with your spouse's freedom, and you are acting as a parent to him or her. Because of God's design for human maturity, it is natural for a spouse to rebel against a controlling, parental mate. Those who seek to control end up destroying love.

"The ability for each partner to allow the other to be a free, separate person is one of the hallmarks of a solid relationship."

Ultimately, a balance between separateness and togetherness is required for a healthy marriage. When each spouse is a complete person with individual interests and pursuits, the time spent pursuing individual interests actually produces a God-given longing for togetherness which enriches the marriage. But if, because of a controlling spouse, there is no separateness, then there can be no genuine togetherness because there are no longer two complete people involved in the relationship. 

# God's Values for Marriage

Each marriage develops its own unique character, shaped by the spouses' values. So your values are the primary boundaries for your marriage. What you value determines what you will allow, what you will fight against, and what you will pursue in your marriage. Consequently, you should cultivate godly values in your marriage. Think long-term. Invest time and energy in developing and defending your values, and it will yield valuable dividends~not the least of which will be a deep relationship with your spouse.

## The Worst Value Ever

Personal happiness should not be the highest goal, the most sought-after value in a healthy marriage. Happiness is not an end in itself; it is a product of hard work and patience in the relationship. There will be times in any marriage when one or both partners is unhappy, but this unhappiness might be the direct result of painful personal growth. And this growth is a key component of the relationship's long-term vitality.

Boundary-loving spouses will work through these tough times together and will usually reach a deeper happiness as a result. But if happiness is the highest value for the marriage and it is absent for a season, we will assume that the relationship itself is the problem.

"People who always want to be happy and pursue it above all else are some of the most miserable people in the world."

Surprisingly, when we are most unhappy, good things are probably happening~if we will let them!

## God's Values for

God has articulated several values that form the bedrock of strong marriages. We must know them, cultivate them and work on them diligently.

"Stand against anything in yourself or your spouse that would de-stroy them. This is righteous indignation, and your marriage may depend on it...Pursue them with everything you can muster. They will not fail you in the end."

### 1. Love God

When you hold loving God as your primary value, your attention stays on your relationship with Him. This helps you to remember that you are not the one in control, and this helps you to establish boundaries in your own life. God tells you how to change and gives you the power to do it.

*"When loving God is our orienting principal in life, we are always adjusting to what He requires from us."*

### 2. Love Your Spouse

God designed the marriage relationship to be one nourished by agape love, self-sacrificial love focused solely on the good of the other person. Agape love is based on a commitment to the relationship and is active in preserving and developing it.

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*"This kind of love may cost you. It may put you out. It may be difficult for you. But if you were the other, it would be good. And to love her as yourself means that you want it for your spouse as desperately as you would want it for yourself."*

When you love your spouse with agape love, you will be sensitive to the ways your choices will affect your spouse. You will place top priority on improving your spouse's life, and you will desire the other's best even when he or she is unable to see what that is.

**3. Honesty**

*"Anything, large or small, is forgivable and able to be worked through in a relationship~except deception."*

Dishonesty damages any relationship because it subverts the possibility of knowing one another as you truly are. Honesty is, therefore, a pre-requisite for the growth of any relationship. However, honesty must be coupled with love, commitment, forgiveness, and grace to listen to and to deal with the truth.

**4. Faithfulness**

*"A faithful spouse is one who can be trusted, depended upon, and believed in, and one in whom you can rest."*

Faithfulness in marriage goes far beyond the physical aspects. Some spouses are physically faithful but emotionally unfaithful. Faithfulness means being able to be trusted in all aspects of the relationship.

The faithful couple will:

- **Trust each other**
- **Have confidence in each other**
- **Be assured of each other's character and dependability**
- **Be convicted of your ability to trust each other**
- **Be certain of each other's fidelity**
- **Be true to one another**
- **Be certain of one another**
- **Be permanent to each other**
- **Rest in each other**

**5. Compassion and Forgiveness**

Remember that your spouse is imperfect, just like you. At some point, your mate will fail you in some way. But nothing in a relationship will permanently destroy it if

spouses are willing to forgive one another. In order for marriages to survive the crises they will face, husbands and wives must be tender-hearted toward one another.

*"Hardness of heart, much more than failure, is the true relationship killer."*

Tenderheartedness involves a recognition of our own ability to sin, a vulnerability with regard to our own weaknesses, an empathy toward our spouse~and a willingness to repent.

**6. Holiness**

A holy person is one who is pure and blameless. When you and your spouse pursue holiness, it means that you are both striving to become the person God would have you to be, the kind of person who can be truly loving.

*"In marriage, holiness is anything but boring. It is the kind of purity and trustworthiness from which the deepest kinds of passion flow."*



# Resolving Conflict In Marriage

**Resolving conflicts** is not a "one-size-fits-all" proposition. There are different kinds of conflict and proper ways to handle each. Most conflict in marriage is not about right and wrong, so it is often counterproductive to focus on who's right and who's wrong. What is important is identifying the type of conflict you are having so you can work together toward re-solution. Most conflicts fall into one of these six categories.

## **Conflict #1: Sin of One Spouse**

In this type of conflict, there is a definite right and wrong. In this case, the spouse who confronts the sin must consider his or her attitude carefully, remembering that humility and grace are essential for healing. The spouse who confronts

the sin in the life of the mate should do so without being judgmental, but without minimizing the sin either. At all times, couples need to deal with the sin as a team fighting for what they value in the marriage.

*"The best thing that anyone can do in the face of the sin of a spouse is to demonstrate the same attitude God has toward someone who sins: 'Be kind and compassionate for one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you'"*  
(Ephesians 4:32).

## **Conflict #2: Immaturity or Brokenness of One Person**

If you "fell in love," you probably idealized and overlooked the faults of your sweetheart during

your early dating days. But in the close proximity of the marriage relationship, those faults are bound to surface. When they do, it is important to accept your mate's imperfections, and recognize that they are not sins, but perhaps areas where maturity is needed. Be honest with your spouse about these problems, communicate your support to your spouse, and humbly recognize your own areas of immaturity. And work together to develop a plan of action for overcoming the difficulties.

## **Conflict #3: Hurt Feelings That Are No One's Fault**

Every person has areas of sensitivity; innocent comments and actions often result in pain.

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“What is important is that we learn how to deal with the kind of hurt where no one is really wrong.”

Here are some hints for working through this kind of hurt:

1. When you are hurt, acknowledge it to yourself. Don't ignore how you feel.
2. Communicate your hurt to your spouse, but don't blame your spouse for it. It is your reaction that is the problem.
3. If you are the one whose innocent actions have caused pain, empathize with your spouse, and don't devalue or minimize the pain.
4. Know what hurts you and work proactively to avoid being hurt in the future.
5. Pursue healing so that your sensitivity will stop interfering with your life and relationships.
6. Remember that there is no right or wrong here, and thus no judgment to be cast; guard against the temptation to "go to court."

## Conflict #4: Conflicting

Since marriage is the union of two complete persons, there will be times when a husband and a wife desire different things for their relationship. When this occurs, avoid making your preference the only right choice, treating your spouse poorly for disagreeing. Embrace the way that your spouse thinks and acts differently from the way you do. In fact, remember that your differences are a part of what attracted you to each other. Make every effort to meet your spouse's desires before you meet your own. (You may find that you grow and expand your horizons as a result of trying the things your spouse prefers.) Weigh your motives, confirming that you desire what you do for right reasons. If an agreement still cannot be reached, record who gets his or her way, and take turns being the decision maker.

## Conflict #5: Desires of One Versus the Needs of the Relationship

There are times when one spouse desires something that puts a stress on the relationship. A spouse may desire to go back to school or relocate for a job. In such cases, the husband and wife must decide together what course of action to take. Ultimately, you must strike a balance between prioritizing the relationship and meeting the needs of the partners. The marriage relationship must never be subservient to the desires of only one spouse, but if both spouses are growing through individual pursuits, the marriage itself will grow stronger as well.

“In the end, the marriage benefits as each member grows. But keep it in balance, making sure that the marriage gets served first.”

## Conflict #6: Known Versus Unknown

In many ways, your spouse may know you better than you know yourself. To grow as an individual and as a spouse, you should be open to hearing what your spouse can tell you about yourself. Covenant with each other that you will be honest and open with one another. When your spouse confronts you, do not be defensive. Accept the feedback and learn from it. Above all, be gracious to each other, remembering that neither of you is perfect, and that change takes time.

## Conflict Resolution

In any situation of conflict, there are two major elements that

affect the course of conflict resolution—the issue itself and the attitudes of the people who must deal with the issue. If the attitudes of the people dealing with the conflict are good, usually the issue itself will not be a problem. But when bad attitudes prevail, the problem is compounded.

Those who see their problems, seek to solve them, and accept limits are boundary-lovers. Those who resist change, refuse limits of any kind, and deny their own faults are boundary-resistant.

A person's attitude toward boundaries will dictate the methods that will be effective for resolving conflict.

## Resolving Conflict with a Boundary- Loving Spouse

A boundary-loving spouse is open to the truth, to his or her spouse's freedom, to responsibility, and to love. Thus, the path to conflict resolution is easier because both partners have the same goals for the relationship and can work together through the conflict. As an overall strategy, conflict resolution with a boundary-loving spouse must begin with observation and confrontation. You cannot fix what you cannot see or discuss. To deal with the problem, ownership, grief, and apology are necessary. If you have caused the problem (or contributed to it), you must own your role in the conflict. Confess and apologize for any hurt you have caused, and extend forgiveness for pain you have suffered.

After you identify your part in the problem, you must repent and commit to change. Recognize that problems do not go away immediately, so allow time for change. But be active in the process of seeking growth, and establish a plan that will force you to make sure that the problem will be held in check.

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## Resolving Conflict with a Boundary-Resistant Spouse

A boundary-resistant person refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing and will not accept correction or feedback. The basic attitude of someone who resists boundaries is this: "I should be able to do whatever I want to do in life." Ultimate freedom is the highest value for such a person. But boundaries dictate that you cannot do what you want all of the time.

When confronting someone who violates boundaries, remember that sometimes ignorance is the cause. Your spouse may be crossing your boundaries without knowing it. Always approach the issue from this perspective first. If your spouse accepts the feedback and repents, the conflict will already be on the road toward resolution. But if your spouse resists, prayerfully consider these steps:

1. Gather around you a circle of godly friends from whom you can draw emotional support during the time of conflict with your spouse.
2. Make sure you are right with God and growing closer to Him.
3. Identify the specific issue that is the source of conflict. What boundary is being violated? How does this violation affect you and your love for your spouse? Is this a pattern or a rare occurrence?
4. Demonstrate to your spouse that his or her feelings are important to you, that you want to understand his or her

point of view, and that you want to accept the truth in his or her viewpoint.

5. Love your spouse. Communicate that your goal is the restoration of a loving relationship that is being hindered by the crossing of boundaries.
6. Earn the right to ask your spouse to change by admitting how you are contributing to the problem and deliberately making changes in yourself—even if your spouse does not change.
7. Make clear and specific requests for change.
8. Be patient with your spouse and give him or her time to change.
9. If your spouse persists in violating boundaries, establish deliberate, reality-based, enforceable consequences which will eliminate any benefit your spouse receives from crossing boundaries. These consequences should be designed to protect you and preserve your spouse's freedom, while encouraging him or her to change. Consequences should be immediate, appropriately-severe; they should not be humiliating. Design them to be modified as your spouse grows and changes.
10. Warn your spouse before implementing limits and consequences.
11. Follow through. If you don't, you are just nagging—an ineffective substitute for real boundaries.
12. Observe and evaluate over time, making changes in boundaries or consequences as necessary.



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