



TAKING CONTROL

Healthy Boundaries

by Ruth N. Koch

“If I don’t do it, it won’t get done!” Sound familiar? I can almost see you nodding. Life is full—too full! You have a huge load to carry and no one else seems to be stepping up to the plate. You’re fully functional, with lots to offer. Then why do you sometimes feel dysfunctional? You can’t quite put your finger on it, but something seems broken. It’s as if everything and everyone is controlling what you do, when you do it and how you should get it done, instead of the other way around. You don’t necessarily want to be in control of others, but you’d like to take some control over your own life—yet, you don’t know where to start. You are not alone!

Take Maria, for example. She arrives at my “You Made It Through the Holidays!” workshop feeling slightly depressed and disappointed. It isn’t the way she wants to feel, but Maria finds she has lots of company, others who also try to make each Christmas perfect and take personal responsibility for everyone’s feelings—and in the process exhaust and depress themselves. Women often feel blue and a bit let down after Christmas. That’s why as a social worker and counselor, I offer a workshop that encourages women to share how they managed the holidays and to make some new choices.

Maria compares her post-Christmas disappointment with the way she felt after her parents’ 50th wedding anniversary dinner party. Since her siblings weren’t very interested, Maria made all the arrangements and hosted the event. She gritted her teeth and did the work, even though she knew her two sisters and brother were not playing fair. By this time, the others are nodding in understanding—Maria has voiced that all-too-familiar cry: If I don’t do it, it won’t get done!

Finding she is in a safe place, Maria rushes on, “I’m already thinking into the new year and all the responsibilities I have at work, the high school, the community center, the food bank ... Now that I’ve increased my hours so we can save for the kids’ college, I just wish I hadn’t said I would do so many things. How am I going to make it all happen? Everyone is depending on me. You know, volunteering used to be fun and I love the feeling that I’m helping, but now it’s more like a job.”

Maria’s feeling bedraggled, beat-up and burned out.

And she’s feeling used.

Others in the group seem to agree; then Camilla chimes in: “And how come everybody thinks they can call me with their ‘emergencies’ and I’ll bail them out? Most of my friends think I’ll just step into any problem they have and make it better. But the real problem is that they’re right: I just don’t know how to say ‘no’ to anyone. That’s it. I can’t say ‘no’ and everyone knows it. I love my friends and I try to be a good friend to them, but I’m not sure they’re always being good friends to me. What would happen if I just said, ‘I’m too tired today, you’ll have to find someone else?’ Yikes! I bet they’d all be pretty mad!”

So, Camilla weighs the imagined negative consequences of taking care of herself and decides she’ll just keep doing what she’s been doing, so as not to upset others and risk her friendships. Little does she know that deciding to fume silently, as well as refusing to acknowledge her limitations, actually endangers her friendships more than speaking up ever could!

My Own Journey of Self-Discovery

Sometimes I see Maria or Camilla when I look in the mirror. I hate to admit that I have limitations of body, mind and spirit ... so I just keep pushing—trying harder to meet everyone else’s needs, yet ignoring my own. Somewhere along the line I picked up the idea that it wasn’t good to have limitations—even though every human has natural limitations! No one can do everything and no one can do everything perfectly, but don’t try to tell me that when I think my family or a friend would be helped by my efforts!

I find that when I ignore my own needs and become exhausted and burned out, I feel resentful toward my friends and family. If others ask for something, I feel obligated to give it to them—and then I’m either mad at them for asking or angry with myself for being so easily invaded. When I’m over-functioning like this, my time is spoken for, my energy is committed to others and my spirit begins to sag. And resentment is never far from the surface. Worst of all, the warm and generous help I want to give turns into a grudging, confused duty. Sound familiar? I lived that way for many years and couldn’t figure out what was wrong.

I was nearly 45 years old when I first learned about healthy personal boundaries. I was attending a continuing education seminar for mental health workers when the speaker explained personal boundaries. I’m sure a giant cartoon lightbulb lit up over my head! Could poor personal boundaries be the reason I was so often physically and emotionally depleted? Could that be why I felt so much anxiety and confusion in personal relationships?

As I learned more, I was surprised and delighted to discover that healthy personal boundaries could do more to support and sustain healthy relationships than all my rushing around, all my anxious interactions, all my overworking and over-committing combined. Healthy boundaries actually support and sustain healthy relationships. What a freeing and calming revelation!

And thus began my journey of self-discovery that eventually led to guilt-free self-control—the ability to make realistic commitments that sometimes involve saying an enthusiastic “yes” and other times a confident “no.” Because of healthy boundaries, I experience less stress and anxiety. They’ve helped me become the person I know I’m intended to be.

Discovering your own healthy boundaries will reinforce what you already know is healthy and help you move closer to freedom, peace, self-control and self-confidence. You’ll find that the quality of a relationship isn’t measured by the level of your activity or the depth of your exhaustion, but by a balance between respecting others and respecting yourself. Sound like a great way to live? It is!

What are Personal Boundaries?

Personal boundaries are an invisible or symbolic parameter that marks where you end and others begin. Understanding this is key to understanding how to be personally healthy and have healthy relationships.

Another way to think about personal boundaries is as a property line that lets you know where your ownership lies—what you are and are not responsible for. It’s like your backyard:

- *You are responsible for what is in your backyard and for keeping your own yard in good order. But if you decide to jump over your neighbor’s fence and rearrange his or her bushes and trees, plant flowers to make the yard more colorful and pull out some nasty weeds, you are violating your neighbor’s boundaries.*
- *In the same way, when you’re trying to manage and control the lives of others, and exhausting yourself trying to make everyone happy, it’s as if you are jumping over the fence into their yard, rearranging and tidying without permission.*

I like to think about personal boundaries as a way to be separate-but-connected. Healthy personal boundaries help you enjoy being connected to others while honoring the separate self you were created to be.

Your Essential Self

When I look at others around me, it doesn't take long for me to realize that we are all different. Each person makes a unique contribution to family, friends and society. I personally do not think that comes about by accident; I truly believe that there is purpose and a plan to all of us being here, at this time and in this place—a purpose and a plan not devised or governed by me, but one that was designed by God, who made me and loves me.

The unique way in which God put each of us together can be called our essential self—the essence of who we are and how we fit together with others in the larger scheme of life. We are happiest and will feel the most fulfilled when we live within the design of that essential self—being who God created us to be, doing the work God has planned for us to do.

If that's so, you might ask, then why do I feel so miserable? My answer is that you have probably lost that essential self because of poor boundaries. Let's explore this further.

How can you tell if you've lost your self? Some signs of a lost self are these:

- *You are externally focused, using your life and personal energy only to meet the needs and earn the approval of others.*
- *You feel responsible for the feelings, happiness and contentment of others, thinking it's your fault if anyone is sad or disgruntled.*
- *You overwork and over-commit because you are afraid that others will be mad if you acknowledge that you have limitations—and that you're just plain tired.*
- *You become a control freak, trying to manage your own and others' lives into storybook perfection.*
- *You do for others what they can do for themselves, taking over their lives instead of coaching, training and teaching them how to solve their own problems.*

In the end, living in a way that ignores and disrespects your essential self is a miserable way to live. And besides, it backfires. Instead of being surrounded by happy, fulfilled and grateful people, those we try so hard to please become more demanding and less grateful, sometimes even beginning to disrespect us. The love and approval we try so hard to earn gets lost in ever-escalating demands and whining on their part. It's a strange and perverse payback for over-loving and over-functioning!

What's a Woman to Do?

So what's a woman to do? This becomes a very pertinent question since women tend to become deeply and personally invested in relationships. And because of this, relational disruptions seem like catastrophes.

From the time we are little girls, we're socialized to make relationships a pivotal part of our lives, trying to please others and avoid their displeasure. In fact, if anyone is mad at us, we may consider it a personal failure and obsess about it endlessly! Sometimes it seems that the harder we try to make people happy—to earn approval and avoid disapproval—the more likely those same people are to disrespect us, disapprove of our efforts and take advantage of our good will.

A couple of years ago I traveled to Denver with my husband and elderly parents. The night before we were to go home I came down with stomach flu. The next morning I dragged myself to the airport, but became sick again. An airport health facility doctor said I could not fly home until my condition had stabilized. This was not what I wanted to hear: People were counting on me! I had to go to work! My parents needed me! And if I took a later flight home, my husband would have to come back to the airport to pick me up. Mrs. Over-Control wasn't having any!

And besides, I was irrationally convinced that I could override the laws of nature and travel no matter how sick I was.

An airline representative and various medical personnel tried to convince me that I had to stay at the airport, but I refused and objected. In desperation the exasperated, but wise, young doctor leaned across my bed and looked me square in the eye as she said, “If you get sick on that plane, the law requires that the pilot turn the plane around and come back to Denver. And everyone on that plane will be mad at you!”

Ah, the magic words! The prospect of a planeload of people mad at me was even more intimidating than admitting I wasn’t Superwoman. I immediately stopped resisting and uttered a mousy little, “OK, I’ll stay here.”

Personal Boundaries Can Work for You

Women are sacrificially invested in avoiding anger and disapproval. Having healthy personal boundaries helps us avoid the traps of over-functioning, unhealthy concern for the welfare of others and what’s been called “the disease to please.” A woman with healthy personal boundaries sends a signal to others that she respects herself and her own limitations and that she intends to respect others and honor their limitations, too.

Healthy personal boundaries work for you in these ways:

- ***Boundaries help you define how you are like others and how you are different.*** This information helps you know your essential self so that you will at times step forward to offer your services when the need matches your gifts, and at other times step back to allow others to serve when their gifts better fit the need than yours.
- ***Personal boundaries help you take personal ownership of your own actions, thoughts and feelings, making you responsible for your own feelings and behaviors as well as responsible for the consequences of your choices.*** For example, it’s inaccurate to say, “You make me so mad!” because your anger belongs to you and there is no situation in which anger is the only possible response. While your anger may be an appropriate and useful response, others cannot determine how you feel or dictate your actions.
- ***Personal boundaries form a protective shield around your beliefs and allow you to claim them as your own, no matter what others say or think.*** For example, if you are a stay-at-home mom and others think you should be out in the workplace, healthy boundaries can protect the decision you’ve made, give you the courage to make the necessary sacrifices to uphold your choice and help you stay calm in the face of criticism.
- ***Healthy boundaries protect you from enmeshment as well as the intrusion and abuse of others.*** Being enmeshed means that you have lost the healthy distinction between yourself and others and you are “all mushed up” together. Healthy boundaries allow you to decide how much to share with others about such things as your finances, personal life or work, and allow you to decide how much opinion and/or direction you welcome from others about your life decisions.
- ***Your personal boundaries also protect others!*** Sometimes you mean well but are intrusive in your attempts to fix others’ problems or do for them what they can do for themselves. Sometimes it is very appropriate to mind your own business, and healthy personal boundaries give you permission to struggle with that truth. I was surprised and encouraged to find these words in the Bible: “*Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business ... so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders ...*” ¹

When you are busy minding other people’s business you are probably neglecting the business you should be tending—your own. Sometimes it feels better to try to straighten out someone else’s problems rather than your own, but healthy boundaries can help you decide how and when to spend time and energy on others and when to give your own concerns proper attention.

Healthy Boundaries Foster Genuine Closeness

If there's anything a woman wants more than being respected and loved, it's to be genuinely connected to others! That's usually why we make decisions we hope will benefit others, even if those decisions hurt us. In the emotional economy of things, we preserve our connectedness and closeness to others, even if it costs our essential self, our physical and mental health or our peace of mind.

The good news about personal boundaries is that you don't have to trade your essential self for the love and closeness of others. Healthy boundaries foster the closeness we crave in these ways:

- ***You have something unique and important to offer others.*** It is from that unique personality and treasure of gifts, talents and abilities that you can serve others. And the good news is that you don't have to try to be more than you are. It brings me great reassurance to realize that "I am Me" by God's design and to believe that God didn't make a mistake when He made me, or when He made you. By God's provision, you are enough.
- ***When you have healthy personal boundaries, you will courageously and honestly share your thoughts, opinions and preferences with others.*** This allows them to know the real you and gives them the opportunity to show their respect and regard for you, even if they may not always agree with or adopt your preferences. What you think and feel belongs to you, even if you are mistaken and even if your thoughts and feelings are not understood or validated.
- ***Healthy boundaries respect and honor others' boundaries and personal limitations, so that you honor their choice to say "no" as well as the other choices they make about how they use their time and energy.*** When people refuse your requests, arm-twisting doesn't engender closeness, respect does.
- ***It's probably not about you.*** Most of what others do and say and think is about them—it comes from their own needs and desires. Their sadness, anger, frustration, criticisms or disappointment may be directed at you, but it may have little to do with you. Realizing that "life is not all about you" frees you from casting yourself as a victim or martyr and igniting defensive responses that only create distance between you and others. Healthy boundaries help you allow others to have their own thoughts, feelings and preferences, even if you do not agree with them and even if they are mistaken. Their feelings and thoughts belong to them.
- ***People with healthy boundaries care what others think about them and desire their approval; however, the approval that others give or withhold does not become the primary reason for their life choices.*** I feel a sense of peace knowing that particular place of influence belongs only to God. Getting that straight in our minds relieves much of the fear of disapproval that distances us from others.
- ***Healthy boundaries challenge you to appropriately mind your own business and to ask permission to enter someone else's backyard.*** Showing respect to others by acknowledging their responsibility for their own lives can prevent resentment and hostility.
- ***Healthy boundaries help you accept the truth about your own imperfections and life's realities so that you give up trying to be bigger than life. Relax, and say, "Enough is enough."*** As you move through life you learn a few things: life is difficult, nothing's perfect, something is always missing, everyone has limitations of some kind. Living with these truths can be both painful and comforting.

It is in the quiet wisdom of healthy boundaries that we draw near to others who are also less than perfect and help each other live in a less-than-perfect world. Healthy boundaries foster an attitude that says, "We're in this together."

Internal and External Boundaries

Internal boundaries protect your beliefs and thoughts and preferences. Internal boundaries are not set against others; instead, they exist to protect, define and encourage the essential self God has created within you.

When we ask teenagers to “Just Say No” to drugs and premarital sexual activity, we are asking them to put their internal boundaries to use, which protect a not-yet-mature young person from the consequences of adult behaviors. Children will learn to say the appropriate “no” later in life if we allow them to make choices as they grow up. For example, when my granddaughter who loves to be tickled says, “Stop!” when I am tickling her, I stop immediately. I want her to learn that her “no” has power. When her younger sister says, “Papaw, don’t be the Tickle Monster, it scares me,” her grandfather stops teasing her so she will know that when she speaks she will be honored.

External boundaries form an imaginary physical space between you and another person, like an invisible “personal bubble.” External boundaries concern how close we stand to people, how much touching is involved, as well as sexual boundaries.

External boundaries are also influenced by cultural traditions and behaviors; those from cultures that allow more physical contact among strangers and who stand very close to others during conversation may need to be sensitive to the reactions of others. Well-meaning people can unknowingly invade another person’s “personal bubble” by hugging without permission or standing too close during conversation. Honoring external boundaries challenges us to respect others’ preferences and invites us to ask permission before physical contact. If you think someone needs a hug, ask first!

Four Kinds of Personal Boundaries

Healthy Boundaries

This is a good way to live! Notice that the fence is low enough to allow someone on the inside to be separate-but-connected to others. And notice that there is a gate in the fence—and that the latch on the gate is on the inside. The person inside the healthy boundary determines how close people get, the amount of touching, emotional intimacy and conversational intimacy.



Missing Boundaries

This is an exhausting way to live! A person with no boundaries is connected to others, but not a separate self. People without boundaries can’t tell when they are abusing others or even when others are abusing them. They talk at an intimate level on first meeting, accept food or gifts they don’t want, take food off someone’s plate without asking, open other people’s mail and feel obligated to do whatever someone suggests they should do.

People without boundaries give information they don’t want to give when asked a nosy question and allow others unlimited access to their time. They also expect others to know and fulfill their needs, saying, “If you loved me, you’d know.” And, of course, those without boundaries are so out of touch with their own talents, needs and preferences that they don’t give careful thought before making commitments to serve others, are filled with guilt and anxiety when saying “no” to anyone and are fearful that their “no” will destroy relationships.



Damaged Boundaries

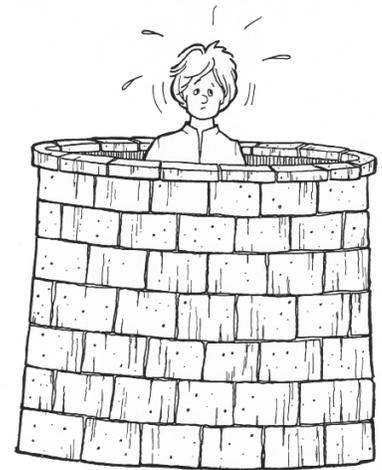
This is a confusing way to live! This picture shows someone who is sometimes a separate self and sometimes enmeshed with others, sometimes too separate and sometimes too connected. The person with damaged boundaries is inconsistent in taking control of her life, and determines personal boundaries by her feelings and not by thoughtful choices. Her boundaries are usually set by measuring how insecure, tired, sick, lonely, angry or moody she is at any given moment. By making decisions on emotion and impulse, and not exercising thoughtful choices, the person with damaged boundaries confuses herself and others.



Walls

This is a lonely way to live! People with wall-like boundaries are entirely separate from others, not connected. Walls are used to separate and there are many different kinds of walls: walls of fear, anger, confusion, silence or even a wall of over-talking. Sometimes humor is used to distance others or using an unconventional speaking style or made-up accent. Anything that distances you from others and prevents simple human connection could become a wall that offers complete protection and privacy but no intimacy or closeness.

A person may move back and forth between “missing boundaries” and “walls.” When they’ve had enough isolation, they seek over-involvement and when being enmeshed with others exhausts them, they seek the relief of a wall. How badly you need a wall may reveal how damaged or missing your boundaries are. For example, if you are convinced that the only way you can have a little peace and quiet is to leave town, you are looking for a wall, a sure sign that you need to work on your everyday boundaries!



Three “I CAN” Statements

When you have healthy personal boundaries you will be able to make these three statements:

1. ***I can take care of myself.*** When you are separate-but-connected to others, you know yourself and your limitations and you are willing to care for yourself without depending on others to somehow know and fulfill your needs. You have the courage and confidence to ask for what you want and need from others, understanding that they may grant, refuse or negotiate your request.
2. ***I can enjoy the care others give me.*** Healthy boundaries help you receive from others as you acknowledge your needs and “open the gate” in your boundary to allow people you choose to come closer. Healthy boundaries free you from having to pretend you have it all together all the time, making it possible to accept help from others.
3. ***I can enjoy helping others.*** When offering help to others comes out of wholeness, health and self-knowledge and not from fear or insecurity, you will not only enjoy serving others, but you will know how to serve in a way that respects another’s boundaries.

Serving from decisiveness instead of insecurity or fear helps you identify and reject an internal barter system at work inside most of us. It goes something like this: “If I fix all their problems and take care of them, they will repay me by liking me, thanking me and doing everything they can to make me happy.” Unfortunately, that’s a barter system that will always disappoint, because of two very human factors:

- It is human nature to want more and more from the people who take care of us.
- When you create dependency and obligation in others by overhelping, you will sooner or later find rage lurking beneath the dependence you’ve instilled.

Ingratitude and rage are often the payback in the internal barter system— not at all what you bargained for!

Ten Steps to Healthy Personal Boundaries

If you’ve lost your essential self and you’re wishing you knew how to regain the sense of peace and purpose, here are ten steps toward setting healthy personal boundaries:

1. ***Establish a daily quiet time you can use to evaluate your choices.*** Careful evaluation helps you see patterns of when you act out of impulse, old habits or fear of the anger or disapproval of others. Each morning, set your mind on a positive course. (I feel stronger when I remember I don’t have to do this on my own, asking God to help me stay calm and make God-pleasing decisions.) In the evening, look back and identify any choices you made thoughtlessly or out of fear, and think through how you will handle a similar situation next time. Ask God to forgive you for anything you have done that may have hurt others, whether it was intentional or not.
2. ***Accept that you aren’t perfect.*** Only God is perfect and you will find it a great relief to acknowledge that you are not. As you do, you will discover that He is taking care of you and the people you love—so that you can focus on fitting into His plan for your life, instead of trying to be responsible for the plan yourself! It is a great relief to give up the futile quest for perfection this side of heaven. One of the Psalms in the Bible says, *“It is useless to work so hard for a living, getting up early and going to bed late. For the Lord provides for those He loves, while they are asleep.”* 2
3. ***Remember that old tune: “Take good care of yourself, you belong to me.”*** I think God is humming that tune for you. Knowing you are part of a bigger plan—His plan—gives you incentive to take good care of yourself, paying attention to your physical, emotional, spiritual and social well-being. Care for yourself with the same devotion that you usually give to others and bask in the love God lavishes upon you.
4. ***Your sense of humor is in there—let it come out.*** Over-seriousness has caused many a person to confuse opportunities with obligations and to miss the simple joys of life. Enjoy the exuberance of children, the antics of pets, the ironies of daily life. Keep some cartoons handy, read a book that celebrates the lighter side of life, become aware of the many opportunities to smile and maybe even giggle. How long has it been since you laughed out loud? Good humor gives you a healthy perspective about what you can and cannot manage and a way to balance your own and others’ unrealistic expectations.
5. ***Get to know your self.*** Who are you? Where are your roots? Do you love art, music, sports, cooking, knitting? Are you compassionate, funny, athletic, intellectual? Let that self-knowledge help you reclaim and take appropriate responsibility for developing and using your self. Healthy personal boundaries invite us to have a self before we try to give it away to others.

6. ***Get a life.*** You have a personal history and a life beyond the immediate needs of those closest to you. How long has it been since you had the energy and time to enjoy your extended family, friends from the past, college chums and childhood playmates? How long has it been since you developed a new friendship? People with poor boundaries tend to sell out to those who make the loudest demands or who manipulate with guilt, so a wider world helps you balance what you do for others with a sense that you are a whole and complete person, one who is supposed to have a life of her own as well as a shared life with others.
7. ***Ask for a friend's help.*** Make a deal with your spouse or best friend and agree that you will each discover and identify, nurture and celebrate your essential self. Give each other permission to learn a healthy balance between self-care and caring for others, and encourage one another to be the person you were meant to be.
8. ***If your self is temporarily lost and you can't imagine where to look, seek professional counseling help.*** A professional counselor will walk alongside you as you get reacquainted with your self, define who you are, celebrate your uniqueness and explore your purpose in life.
9. ***Act on your healthy personal boundaries by using assertive behaviors.*** Assertive behaviors are not about rights or getting your way. On the contrary, assertive behavior is mutually respectful behavior and when you use assertive, not aggressive, behaviors you will honor the other person's limitations, preferences, choices and beliefs, as well as your own.
10. ***You're human!*** That is neither an admission of defeat nor a cry of helplessness. It's a fact. You have limitations of energy, knowledge, expertise, health, interest, as well as limitations in other areas. Now breathe a sigh of relief and acknowledge your limitations, allowing others to sometimes care for you. Give up futile attempts to give the impression that you are invulnerable and perfect. You're not, and isn't it a relief to admit it? If you've tried in the past to live up to being Superwoman, now is the time to make changes in small ways and in small steps, learning as you go.

Selfishness or Self-Care?

You may initially be uncomfortable adopting healthy boundaries and practicing assertive behaviors. After all, you once chose your less healthy behaviors for a reason!

Your discomfort will be a window into those reasons, so pay attention to situations in which you find it difficult and uncomfortable to have healthy boundaries, asking yourself, "What role did my poor boundaries play in this situation?" Often the answer will fall into one of these two categories: Poor boundaries helped you avoid conflict or helped you feel accepted and loved.

Over your lifetime, you have probably observed that conflict is not necessarily negative, and that it was actually a signal that something important needed to be examined. When you try to avoid conflict at all costs, you only prolong it or bury it so that it doesn't get worked on. And hiding your real self so that you will be accepted and loved means that someone is going to accept and love a fantasy person, a person that isn't really you! Healthy boundaries foster genuine intimacy and genuine closeness between people who are honestly themselves with each other.

However, when you adopt healthy boundaries in new areas, you will also find that some people will be less than thrilled with your new choices. After all, your poor boundaries may have provided them with unlimited services and with someone who would bail them out of any jam at any time. That wasn't a bad deal for them, was it? So don't be surprised if the people you love—and the people you love to serve—are a bit confused when you start to make some small changes in small ways that will lead to healthier boundaries.

Out of their discomfort and sense of loss, they may raise some questions and comments like the following:

Comment: *“If you loved me, you’ll keep doing what you’ve always done for me.”*

Appropriate answer: *“It’s because I love and respect you that I’m going to respect your ability to manage your own life. I realize that in the past I have taken responsibility that really belongs to you. That wasn’t fair to you and I apologize for doing that.”*

Comment: *“You’re being selfish!”*

Appropriate answer: *“Jesus was a great example of both serving others and taking good care of Himself. When He was tired, He rested. When people pressed Him on every side for help, healing and deliverance, He balanced His service with time in prayer and time away from others. The Bible says, ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’³ So far I haven’t been very good at loving myself and I’m trying to learn how to do that so that I can love others—including you—in a better way.”*

Comment: *“And after all I’ve done for you ...”*

Appropriate answer: *“I am very grateful for everything you have done for me and I am coming to realize that true love comes without a price tag or an I.O.U. I want to trust your love and give you my love without either of us having to pay for that love. We give each other love and help as a gift.”*

Comment: *“How can you abandon me like this?”*

Appropriate answer: *“I’m learning that healthy relationships are a balance of togetherness and separateness. I enjoy the times we are together, but I also want to learn how to be separate at times. I’m trying to learn a healthy balance of togetherness and separateness.”*

God Has a Plan for You

The God who created you has a plan for your life, a plan He set in motion by giving you an essential, unique self. You are precious to God and equipped by God to live the life He designed for you. The Bible says, *“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”⁴*

You can start today and have a lifetime of deeper meaning and purpose. You can learn to say “yes!” to opportunities that fit into God’s plan and “no!”—without guilt or anxiety—to opportunities that do not fit God’s plan as you understand it. God’s life plan develops and matures as you do.

God knows how you feel. God knows how much you want to be loved—and He loves you! God knows how insecure and unsure you are at times, and He offers you direction. God knows how hard it is to admit that you can’t do everything and you can’t do everything perfectly, and He offers you a Savior to take away the shame and condemnation of not being perfect.

God loves you with an everlasting love. Because Jesus lived a perfect life in your place, you are now free from the crushing burden of trying to achieve perfection. God laid the punishment for your imperfections on Jesus when He died on the cross, and you can live every day under God’s grace and in peace. The Bible says that God has met your deepest need, your need for a Savior, and He will supply everything you need to live a fulfilling, purposeful life: *“He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”⁵*

God wants you to have healthy, meaningful relationships. He has placed you in a world that needs you and has created within you a need for the help and care of others. In God’s relational economy, healthy personal boundaries help us achieve the balanced life we were meant to live.

Healthy personal boundaries are a way to be healthily separate so that you take responsibility for yourself. And healthy boundaries allow you enough connectedness so you can care for others in ways that truly serve them.

Take action and say “yes!” to healthy personal boundaries in your life! If you would like additional resources or help finding someone in your area to talk to, Lutheran Hour Ministries can help. Call **1-800-876-9880**.

- 1 This quote can be found in the Bible (NIV), 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4, verses 11 and 12.
- 2 This quote can be found in the Bible (TEV), Psalm 127, verse 2.
- 3 Versions of this quote can be found in the following places in the Bible:
Matthew, chapter 19, verse 19; Matthew, chapter 22, verse 39; Mark, chapter 12, verse 31; and Luke, chapter 10, verse 27.
- 4 This quote can be found in the Bible (NIV), the book of Jeremiah, chapter 29, verse 11.
- 5 This quote can be found in the Bible (NIV), the book of Romans, chapter 8, verse 32.

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Revised 2011

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