



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Creating Healthy Relational  
Boundaries, Pt 1:  
The Individual as Part of  
the Whole*

1 Corinthians 12

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Boundaries are necessary for healthy, life-giving relationships. Some call the Bible the ultimate book of boundaries, outlining what is permissible and not permissible—these boundaries were designed to help us create healthy relationships with God and one another: “Thou shalt not kill, covet, idolize, steal.” It’s hard to have a good relationship when someone is doing those things!

At the same time, Jesus was the ultimate boundary breaker, casting aside human-made boundaries. He broke boundaries where they had become out of control and were harming relationships with God and others. “You’ve heard it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ but I say to you do not violently resist an evildoer.”

These examples underscore the challenge we face when creating healthy relational boundaries. There are some boundaries that are firm—*Don’t kill people!* And other boundaries that are more porous and situational—*Yes, child, I will go back and get the item you forgot. This time.* How do we know when to draw hard boundaries and when to soften them or erase them altogether?

In this *Creating Healthy Relational Boundaries* worship series our goal is to draw upon Biblical wisdom *and* modern-day research and insights to help us all create the best relationships with our families, friends, congregation, and world! **And of course with God.** Today, we are going to start with the boundaries we need to establish in order to be our best God-created selves, which then leads to good relationships with others.

## **BOUNDARIES FOR OURSELVES AS INDIVIDUALS**

Step One in creating healthy boundaries is understanding that creating boundaries for ourselves as individuals is crucial, and what God wants for us to be healthy and happy. If we are boundaryless, we allow people to walk over us. Or we are the ones who do the walking. TO use an extreme example, when we see abusive relationships the abuser is one who cannot stay within themselves. And the one abused, though not

2 their fault, has their boundaries violated. Individual boundaries are important!

Have you ever had a friend or coworker or relative who, nice as they may, be has a difficult time drawing boundaries for themselves? I think of No-boundary Charlie Brown, getting used time and again in his relationship with Lucy: whether its Lucy giving him advice (for her own profit) or pulling the football over and over. And pathetic Charlie Brown just keeps coming back for more. So-called peace at his own expense.

At the same time, do you know someone who has drawn their boundaries so thick, it is as if they wear a suit of emotional and relational armor that it is impenetrable, and they are unable to even cooperate with others?

So how do we create boundaries that are both firm enough that we can maintain our individual integrity, while at the same time having boundaries that allow us to connect with others.

## **THE INDIVIDUAL AS PART OF THE WHOLE**

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### **1 Corinthians 12:12–20; 27**

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

*Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.*

*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

When we read this scripture we usually focus on the necessity for all of us to work together as the Body of Christ. That's great! But today, I want to highlight something that we often overlook: the necessity for us to be individuals working together as the body of Christ.

Verse 27: *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

Let's start from the beginning. God created us as individuals.<sup>1</sup> It is important for us to be our own entities. And to be our own entity we have to have boundaries.

One of the best way to think about this is to go down to the cellular level of life. Cells must have cell walls/membranes/boundaries in order to even exist as cells. If they didn't have that, their innards would spill all over the place (not unlike some boundaryless you might know who are always spilling their lives over everyone around them). Cells have to have boundaries in order to exist.

At the same time, in order to create complex life forms, cells must also interact and cooperate with one another. Not every cell can be a heart cell, or a bone cell, or a skin cell. Each cell stands alone, yet cooperates with the other cells in order to complete something big, better, more complex. And it all started at the individual molecular level.

Maintaining a sense of self is necessary for both the healthiness of the self, but also the health of the community (e.g., a heart cannot pump blood unless each cell maintains its boundaries/self AND bands together with other heart cells to form the heart). Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many!

Ok Pastor Greg, we get it: be our best together, we have to be our best individually and that requires boundaries. But cells just seem to know how to pull off this **self-differentiation**—what about we humans? How do we do it?! Here's a secret:

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<sup>1</sup>"From cells to societies to ecosystems, things enjoy existence only by virtue of their relationships in larger wholes." (Johnson)

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Sometimes the question is not how thick we draw the boundaries, but how we operate from within them.

I once knew a family that struggled at multiple levels with mental illness, drug addiction, secrets of generational abuse. They were also loving and wonderful people who continually sucked one another into their dysfunction. A funny thing happened. One of the kids of the family grew up, saw the dysfunction and moved away. She didn't storm out of town, didn't cut people off. But created a boundary for herself. She moved off, got an education and job. And, paradoxically, she became the leader of the family from far away AND by her example, taught the others to mature as well. By drawing a boundary.

## **SELF-DIFFERENTIATION, NEXT WEEK**

*The* most important part of creating healthy boundaries is the ability to think and act for ourselves even while we are in contact with emotionally charged people and issues. The fancy term for this is self-differentiation.

Self-differentiated we can...

- ...Define ourselves while still being in touch with others
- ...draw boundaries with the toxic people in our lives
- ...be decisive, take healthy risks, knowing if we fail it does not define us
- ...disagree with one another about things, and recognize that differences of opinion are not litmus tests for whether or not we can be in relationship with someone.
- ...respond rather than react

Jesus may have been the epitome of self-differentiation and we will get to that...next week! Stay tuned.



