

**GOOD
BOUNDARIES
AND
GOODBYES**

**LOVING OTHERS WITHOUT LOSING
THE BEST OF WHO YOU ARE**

LYSA TERKEURST



**NELSON
BOOKS**

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

Introduction

We Can't Set Good Boundaries Without Love

Well, hello. There's so much I want to write in these first words to provide the right environment for this book. I wish I could hand you your favorite coffee, toss you a blanket, set a box of tissues on the table in front of us, put on just the right soundtrack, and catch up on where we both are in life.

I would so much rather talk all of this through face-to-face. Or at least write this to you in a letter in my own handwriting. There's a deeply human element that I don't want to get lost in these black-and-white pages and words typed with a computer font. We're both picking up this book in the middle of real life where we're navigating what works and what doesn't in the relationships we treasure.

And because relationships are so very organic, they move like breath in and out of our lungs, expanding with deep connection one minute and in the next atrophying into complete misunderstanding. Relationships are wonderful and full of love and frustration and wrought with angst and all the things we bring into every attempted embrace with another person. When those we love draw

close to us, they draw close to our issues. And we come face-to-face with their issues as well.

And as we open up to each other, the deeper we connect, the more vulnerable we become. The more vulnerable we become, the more exposed the tender places inside of us become. This exposure is risky. When we dare to be so very known, we risk being so very hurt. When we dare to be so very hopeful, we risk being so very disappointed. When we dare to be so very giving, we risk being so very taken advantage of. And when we dare to unnaturally change into what someone else needs, we risk losing ourselves in the process.

To love and be loved is to be enveloped in the safest feeling I've ever known.

To cause hurt and be hurt is to be crushed with the scariest feeling I've ever known.

You and I both know this. In different ways with different people and to varying degrees, we know the multifaceted complications of love and heartbreak.

We dream of the best, we dread the worst, and we keep trying to figure out how to do relationships right. We build our lives around those we love. And those we love build their lives around us.

We laugh and connect and disconnect and fight and make up and coast and drift and come back and think about how lucky we are to be with someone until we send our counselor the broken heart emoji with the text, "Need help now . . . this isn't going well." Or maybe we use other words and emojis we can't really put right here in this little book.

It's just not all magical like the plots of the Hallmark Christmas movies.

People in these movies seem to live with the blessing of predictability and things always epically working out. There's never a need for ongoing boundaries because there are no ongoing hardships. Once the story turns for good, it stays good until the credits roll.

Last week I sent a text to my friends after watching too many of these movies. It was my attempt at correcting these unrealistic plots. And it went like this:

OPENING SCENE: Snow falling gently on townspeople smiling, laughing, ice skating. Girl is serving customers in the midst of everyone else's fun. She has an unreasonable, mean boss. She looks out of sorts, like she's searching for something, something that's just beyond her grasp. Suddenly a man with a guitar, smug attitude, and unusual fame appears. And he's a secret prince from a far-off land. She spills water on him. He writes her a song. They fall in love.

CLOSING SCENE: She becomes a princess.

But unfortunately, we all know that's unrealistic. Life doesn't tie up in a neat, nice bow. So, really the script should go like this:

OPENING SCENE: Same beginning scenario, but . . . she spills water on the guy, he freaks out, doesn't leave a tip, tries to get her fired, and she goes home mumbling about what a jerk he was. Also, his castle is in foreclosure and soon he's working as a busboy at the same restaurant. She's eventually promoted to manager, becomes independently successful, and she sets boundaries with him because he's being irresponsible in the way he closes out the registers each night. Then she makes some discoveries that cause her to fire him because he's stealing from the cash drawer.

CLOSING SCENE: She buys the castle and invites her friends over to process what went wrong with him and how in the world he could steal from her! But then, after the closing scene, she questions herself over and over and still wishes things could have been different.

Obviously, Hallmark isn't clamoring for me to write for them anytime soon.


But I am eager to process what I believe has been the missing piece in the storyline of my relationships for far too long: *good boundaries*.

Now, this is where I want to look straight into your eyes and say something really important. This isn't a book about leaving people. It's a book about loving people in right and healthy ways. And it's about communicating appropriate boundaries and parameters so that love can stay safe and sustainable. Boundaries aren't meant to shove love away. Quite the opposite. We set boundaries so we know what to do when we very much want to love those around us really well without losing ourselves in the process. Good boundaries help us preserve the love within us even when some relationships become unsustainable and we must accept the reality of a goodbye.

Throughout these pages we'll seek to honestly examine what is and is not healthy in our hearts but also in the relationships where we invest our hearts. Sometimes it's difficult to know what's healthy and what's not, so it's important to seek godly counsel and, in more complex situations like addictions and abuse, someone specifically trained on the issues at hand. (Please see "Getting the Help You Need" on page 231.)

After all, God's ultimate assignment is for us to love Him and love others. And this is exactly what Jesus taught and modeled. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

But we can't enable bad behavior in ourselves and others and call it love. We can't tolerate destructive patterns and call it love. And we can't pride ourselves on being loyal and longsuffering in our relationships when it's really perpetuating violations of what



We can't enable bad behavior and call it love.

God says love is. Please hear me clearly say, the purpose of this book isn't to quickly call out issues in others without looking honestly at ourselves as well. We need to examine our motivations and our mindsets.

And this isn't a message that is encouraging people to divorce quickly, thoughtlessly, or unadvisedly. Proverbs 15:22 reminds us that there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors. This also isn't a message about encouraging people to abandon others just because things get difficult or the other person is walking through a hard season.

But we also don't need to swing the pendulum to the extreme where we stay in a destructive, toxic, or abusive relationship no matter what. (See "Some Important Notes to Consider on Abuse" page 232.) Boundaries, as you will soon see, should help us avoid extremes and live closer to the kind of love God intended for relationships.

Love must be honest. Love must be safe. Love must seek each person's highest good.

And love must honor God to experience the fullness and the freedom of the sweetest connection between two humans.

In fact, when I turn to 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, I'm reminded of God's intention for the purest form of love. Here's how I journaled what I want to remember from these scriptures:

Love is not dishonorable.

Love does not justify wrongs to enable selfishness.


Love does not celebrate evil.
Love requires truth.
Love leads to honor, kindness, and compassion.

So, as we take this journey, let's remember the real purpose of good boundaries. Boundaries protect the right kind of love and help prevent dysfunction from destroying that love. Boundaries help us say what needs to be said, do what needs to be done, and establish what is and isn't acceptable. Love should be what draws us together not what tears us apart.

And, remember, we can't set good boundaries without love. Setting boundaries from a place of anger and bitterness will only lead to control and manipulation. Setting boundaries as a punishment will only serve to imprison us. But setting boundaries from a place of love provides an opportunity for relationships to grow deeply because true connection thrives within the safety of health and honesty.

I guess my greatest fear in writing this book after an unwanted divorce is that it might seem I'm eager to push others away. But that's not true. I'm more eager than ever before to deeply love the people in my life. And I know how destructive it can be to navigate relationship devastation because of a lack of boundaries. I know what it feels like to be paralyzed by another person's choices that break your heart over and over and not know what to do about it. I know the frustration of saying something has to change but feeling stuck when the other person isn't cooperating with those needed changes. So while some relationships become unsustainable to the point that it's necessary to move beyond a good boundary to a goodbye, you don't have to become someone you were never meant to be.

When we're hurt, good boundaries and goodbyes help us to not get stuck in a perpetual state of living hurt.



Love should be what
draws us together not
what tears us apart.

— *lysa*

When we're hurt, good
boundaries and goodbyes
help us to not get stuck in a
perpetual state of living hurt.

This is a book written to help you discover that good boundaries can pave the road for the truest and purest version of love to emerge within the relationships that make up so much of who we are and what we want the most.

As we process good boundaries and learn more about goodbyes throughout the book, I've created a section at the end of each chapter called, "Now, Let's Live This." It's a wrap-up of what we're reading and learning and includes some questions and scriptures to ponder as we go. Remember, this isn't just a message to read, it's one we will want to sit with, wrestle through, and process in prayer. Then, if we want real transformation, we'll have to take the crucial step of application.

This won't be the easiest message to apply to your life, but it will likely be one of the most valuable steps you take toward emotional health and better relationships. And the best part of it all, you won't be alone. I'll be with you as we trust God to lead us through every word and every next step. And you'll also hear from my Christian counselor Jim Cress, who will weigh in with therapeutic insights throughout the book.

Now, Let's Live This . . .

REMEMBER (STATEMENTS TO CLING TO):

- We can't enable bad behavior and call it love.
- Love must honor God to experience the fullness and the freedom of the sweetest connection between two humans.
- Boundaries protect the right kind of love and help prevent dysfunction from destroying that love.
- Love should be what draws us together not what tears us apart.
- Setting boundaries from a place of love provides an opportunity for relationships to grow deeply because true connection thrives within the safety of health and honesty.
- When we're hurt, good boundaries and goodbyes help us to not get stuck in a perpetual state of living hurt.

RECEIVE (SCRIPTURES TO SOAK IN):

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (John 13:34)

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

REFLECT (QUESTIONS TO THINK THROUGH):

- Have you ever considered that establishing healthy parameters in your relationships is actually an act of love? As you start this book, how does this change your perspective?

- What may have motivated you in the past to set boundaries or say a goodbye? Take time to think this through and then write down your answers.
- When you're in a relationship where there's been chaos, confusion, and hurt, reacting in extremes can add even more pain. Some people take on all the blame and minimize the actions of the other person. The opposite extreme is to place sole blame on the other person without checking your own heart. Throughout this book, we want to avoid going to either of these extremes. So, honest self-reflection is always a good practice. Asking yourself these questions is a wise step now, and revisiting them before you set a boundary or say goodbye could also be helpful:
 - Have I set unrealistic expectations?
 - Am I too easily offended?
 - Have I considered my own shortcomings relative to this relationship?
 - Have I sought wisdom from a godly advisor, mentor, or counselor?

PRAYER:

Lord, the greatest desire of my heart is to love and treasure others the way You treasure us. But honestly, sometimes these hard relationship dynamics make it incredibly difficult to discern what is truly loving. So, as I turn these next pages, I ask that You guide me and help me to walk in Your ways, not mine. Show me how to approach my closest relationships with both compassion and a healthy commitment to reality so I am in alignment with You. In Jesus' name, amen.

CHAPTER 1

You Are Not Crazy (You can love them, but you can't change them.)

“You cannot build trust that keeps getting broken.” Those words were coming to me in impossible waves of grief, bumping into the still-raw places of my heart. I waffled from wanting to scream those words to wanting to take them back and swallow them whole.

Before this moment, I'd only been able to write them in my journal. But then, in an unplanned moment of stinging honesty, I spoke them out loud. First to my counselor, then, later, to the man I had been married to for nearly three decades.

“You cannot build trust that keeps getting broken.” It was a gut punch. It can be awful to speak the truth sometimes. And yet, it is much more awful to have truth staring you in the face and deny it.

I loved him. I treasured our long talks processing life and love and even all the everyday stuff that builds close connection. Back when things were normal, I assumed this relationship would always be a big part of my life. But then things started to change, deteriorate, and flip everything upside down. Lies became more common than truth. Second chances turned into third and fourth and fiftieth chances to right the wrongs with truth.

Promises were made.

And, for a season, promises were kept. But just when I thought we were getting somewhere, promises were broken.

The problem is that trust is an incredibly fragile thing to rebuild. The setbacks are cruel. Unexpected sprains are debilitating. And if twisted backward to the point of fracture, the splinters of trust broken over and over are daggers to the heart.

Every bit of me wanted our marriage to be healthy and thriving. And yet everything about reality demanded that changes be made.

The addictions were back. And so were the violations of clearly established boundaries. I could not ignore it or pretend to be okay with it. Every time I saw new evidence, I recoiled both from the pain inside my chest and the piercing flashbacks in my brain. My counselor calls these “triggers.” Each time I was triggered, I was transported back to the time when I didn’t understand addictions. I didn’t understand that good people can do really bad things when addictions take over. I thought I was going crazy.

Seeing evidence of the addictions again screamed terrorizing warnings: “You aren’t safe. It’s happening again. Everything is a lie. You’re about to get blindsided. You won’t survive this.”

I shook my head. My body folded in half. And sobs erupted from the depths of my being. I had given every bit of love and forgiveness I knew to give, and it wasn’t enough. Love given is wildly beautiful. Love received is wildly fulfilling. But for love to thrive

as true and lasting, it must be within the safety of trust. Without trust, love will die. So, I had to say it: “You cannot build trust that keeps getting broken.”

And as I let the words out, I felt as if I was declaring one of the worst defeats of my life. I had the wrong notion that to be a Christian requires that we believe the best no matter what. That it’s unkind to draw boundaries. That it’s noble and commendable to stay in a relationship no matter what. I no longer believe that.

I now believe we must honor what honors God. And in doing so, we must not confuse the good commands to love and forgive with the bad realities of enabling and covering up things that are not honoring to God. When someone’s dishonorable actions beg us not to stay, this should give us serious pause.


My counselor, Jim Cress, once held up a pillow in between my face and his own. He said, “When you are speaking to this person, everything you say must pass through the addictions first. You aren’t talking to the person you love.”

I knew Jim was right. I kept trying to have a conversation with the irrationality of substances that could only allow me to be either the enabler or the enemy. The enabler will be manipulated. The enemy will be lied to. Either way, there is no love in manipulations and lies. Love breathes the oxygen of trust. Love struggles and eventually becomes strangled in the oxygen-depleted grapple of addictions.

Though I wasn’t the one choosing the addictive substances, I was the one now drawing a line that could not be crossed another time. But deep down, I knew the boundary would be crossed just as it had many times before.

The seduction of his many addictions had so captured him that I now knew I wasn’t really talking to the man I loved.

His eyes were the same shape I’d looked in countless times, but his truest self wasn’t there. He could not see what I was seeing. He



We must not confuse the good
commands to love and forgive
with the bad realities of enabling
and covering up things that
are not honoring to God.

— *ups*

would not hear what I was saying. Though we were only a few feet apart, there was a chasm between us.

Health cannot bond with unhealth.

So, either I had to get unhealthy and enable this cycle to continue, or I had to follow through with the boundaries we had agreed upon. In a time of renewal, we had written out what would and would not be acceptable in our relationship moving forward. And now, the realities of those broken vows were a crushing blow.

I hadn't wanted to admit that the addictions were surfacing and spiraling again. To admit that would force me to make the choice to once again turn this man I loved over to his choices. To stop the madness, I would have to let go of his hand. Let go of what had been such a big part of my life. Stop myself from stepping in to rescue him over and over. And then remind myself to breathe a thousand painful and fearful breaths every single day. I knew at some point I would stare at my face in the mirror and wonder, *But what if I rescued him this time and it finally turned everything around? Or what if I don't rescue him and something terrible happens? Will I regret this for the rest of my life? Is there anything else I can do?*

Yet because of all the wise counsel I'd gotten, there was nothing else to do. And it felt like a shameful defeat to me. It's hard to own what you don't choose. I knew I shouldn't own the repercussions of addictions that weren't mine. But when your life is so tightly woven into a collective fabric of a close relationship, it can be excruciatingly maddening to watch someone choose things you know are destructive. Though their choices are their own, the consequences have an impact on everyone who loves them, much like exploding hand grenades. You don't have to be the one to pull the pin to be deeply devastated by the resulting shrapnel.

You can't reason with a person caught in the addiction cycle any more than you can try to talk a live grenade out of exploding.

When the pin is pulled a chain of events is set off that creates destruction. Most people struggling with addictions will have irrational justifications that will never make sense. They don't factor in others. They truly think their choices only affect them.

They don't feel your heartbreak.

They don't want to see your tears.

They will tell you that the blue sky is orange . . . that the orange car is green . . . that their glass is full of one thing when you absolutely know it's something else. And when their lies hit you without even a twitch of remorse from them, you wonder if any truth exists between you at all.

If you go with what they say, you'll become more and more convinced you're the problem. If you oppose what they say, they will make sure you feel you are definitely the problem.

Either way, you lose.

And I was losing . . . my health, my emotional well-being and, even if I didn't want to admit it, my marriage.

So, now the only real choice I had to make was whether or not to lose with my sanity intact.

I realize that more severe issues like addiction may not be what's making some of your relationships incredibly challenging. There are so many reasons relationships can start to slip from being healthy to unhealthy. Or, at least from fulfilling to frustrating.

Relationships are wonderful until they're not. But most of us aren't nearly as equipped as we need to be to know what to do when we know things need to change but the other person isn't willing to or capable of cooperating with the needed changes.

Or your challenge may be with a great person, and you can't figure out how to address something that is bothering you or how to communicate the need for a boundary.

Or it may be with a person in authority over you and boundaries don't feel like they would work.

Or it's with a family member who lives in your home, and though you need some distance, setting a boundary doesn't feel very realistic.

All relationships can be difficult at times, but they should not be destructive to our well-being. If you have relationships in your life where you know something is wrong, but you can't for the life of you figure out what to do, I believe you'll quickly find the reason you need this book. I understand what it feels like to have your body tense and your pulse quicken while your mind is screaming at the other person, "Stop doing this!" You've prayed about this behavior or situation. You've talked about this. You've tried to navigate it. You may have even tried to stop it. But in the end, nothing has worked.

You've reached a place where you know you can forgive the person. And you can love them. You want to save the relationship and get to a better place more than anything. You've made changes. You've listened to wise advice and done everything you know to do. But you've finally realized if they don't want things to change, you cannot change them. And now you're secretly starting to wonder if you are the crazy one.

Friend, you may be brokenhearted. You may be sad. You may be afraid and possibly angry. You may be focused on trying to fix what isn't within your ability to fix. And you may even be fixated on trying to figure everything out.

But you are not crazy. If you are smelling smoke, there is fire.

And the only reasonable option at this point is to either put out the fire or get yourself out of the fire.

Drawing boundaries can help put out fires before they become all consuming. But if the fire keeps burning with increasing intensity, you've got to get away from the smoke and flames. Sometimes, your only option is to say goodbye.

I hope you'll soon see that boundaries aren't just a good idea, they are a God idea. Boundaries are woven into everything God has done since the very beginning. We'll get to that in the coming

chapters. But think about this for now: God even put an actual boundary around the sea during creation. The sea would eventually be known to the people who lived during biblical times as a symbol of chaos. So, the boundary for the sea was a barrier of sand placed by God that the chaos was not allowed to cross (Jeremiah 5:22).

Where there is an abundance of chaos, there is usually a lack of good boundaries. Chaos shouldn't be the norm and while we can't always change the source of the chaos, we must tend to what we can change. Please know: it's not unchristian to set these healthy parameters. It's not unchristian to require people to treat you in healthy ways. And for us to do the same for others. It's not unchristian to call wrong things wrong and hurtful things hurtful. We can do it all with honor, kindness, and love, but we have to know how to spot dysfunction, what to do about it, and when to recognize it's no longer reasonable or safe to stay in some relationships.

Like the other books I've written, this is a message I need most of all. I'm still challenged by setting and keeping boundaries. I've come to understand that boundaries aren't a method to perfect but rather an opportunity to protect what God intended for relationships.

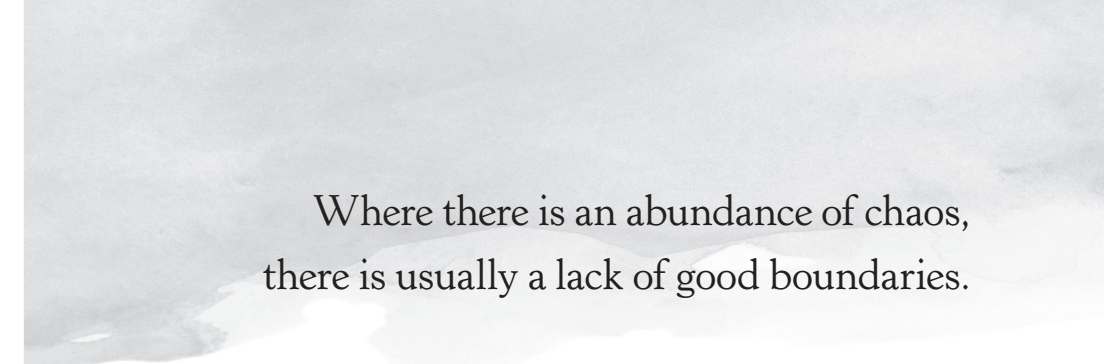
I need that and I imagine you might too.

And we'll also look at goodbyes. We all have relationships that didn't last like we thought they would. But most of us find these endings incredibly confusing and sometimes crushing. Maybe you've wondered like me if it's even possible for a goodbye to be good at all?

If you have questions and hesitations about all of this, you're not alone.

With God's help, in my own tear-filled wrestling through this message, I have found a way forward. A way to truly love others without losing the best of who I am.

I want to acknowledge up front that this journey of setting and keeping healthy boundaries won't always be easy. We'll have to examine some hard places of dysfunction, distress, and even



Where there is an abundance of chaos,
there is usually a lack of good boundaries.

distrust. We'll have to commit to wake up each day with a renewed commitment to assess our boundaries and how we're going to be sure to adhere to them with equal measures of grace, love, and compassion . . . for ourselves and for the ones we're in relationship with.

Compassion is really important to me when I'm processing boundaries. When we're in a difficult relationship or even one that isn't sustainable, especially if addictions are involved, there does need to be a measure of compassion. Because sometimes what is actually driving unhealthy behaviors in people is underlying shame or a lack of peace deep inside. Many times it's both.

What I'm not saying is that because of compassion we condone or enable their actions and stay in situations where there's harm being done. But what I am saying is that, as we take a step back, we can consider having compassion for whatever caused the original root of shame and chaos in their heart that then drove them to try to act and react in such unhealthy ways. We don't want the hurt they've caused to make us betray who we really are. We aren't cruel or mean-spirited so we don't want to bring any of that into our boundary setting.

I also want to have compassion because I don't have life so figured out that I never act and react in unhealthy ways. I have my own issues that I need to work on and work through with counseling. And certainly learning to have compassion appropriately, while still also having boundaries, continues to be one of my biggest lessons.

So if you're ready to work through this, and I mean really work through all of this, then I am too. We're in this together, and there's no one else I'd rather have by my side as we press in and make progress toward the healing and health our hearts are desperately aching for.

And with that I think I'll take a deep breath and go grab another cup of coffee. With great hope in my heart, I'll tuck my Bible under my arm as I walk alongside you.

A note from my counselor, Jim, on triggers:

There are two types of triggers: internal and external. A trigger is a stimulation caused either by an internal thought or an external action from someone else. Whether internal or external, the trigger causes a reaction that makes a painful incident from the past feel as if it's happening in the present. It's almost as if we've been transported back to the "scene of the crime."

The "feeling" part of our brain (known as the limbic system) is wired to search for safety and confidence in what the future holds. In other words, the brain is trying to predict what will happen next.

So, a trigger makes you anxious because it sets off an alarm, making you feel something isn't right or safe.

But the trigger is not the main issue—the main issue is the unhealed trauma still inside you. When you get triggered, it's pointing either to something from your past not yet healed inside you or a new trauma happening in the present moment.

If a fresh trauma is happening and you're in immediate danger, your desire will be to get to safety. If the trigger is because of past trauma, we can learn how to not get hijacked by the anxiety. This will require you to go into your past to work on what's still not healed, while also staying grounded. Stop.

Take a breath and say, “I know what’s going on here. I’ve been here before. I’m not in immediate danger. There is a way out and I can seek help. I can let this feeling inform me, but I don’t have to spiral into panic.”

And no matter the trigger, always remember you have the power to rise in resiliency. When things around you get out of control, you can call a time-out. You can remove yourself. You can seek others to help you process. You can get a plan. You can schedule something on your calendar to look forward to. All these things will help you avoid spinning in the unsafe feelings and circumstances that are causing you pain and confusion.

Now, Let’s Live This . . .

REMEMBER:

- You cannot build trust that keeps getting broken.
- We must not confuse the good commands to love and forgive with the bad realities of enabling and covering up things that are not honoring to God.
- Health cannot bond with unhealth.
- All relationships can be difficult at times, but they should not be destructive to our well-being.
- Boundaries aren’t just a good idea, they are a God idea.
- Where there is an abundance of chaos, there is usually a lack of good boundaries.
- It’s not unchristian to require people to treat you in healthy ways.

RECEIVE:

“I made the sand a boundary for the sea,
an everlasting barrier it cannot cross.
The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail;
they may roar, but they cannot cross it.” (Jeremiah 5:22)

REFLECT:

- Describe what you think when you read this: you cannot build trust that keeps getting broken.
- In what ways have you believed it was unchristian to require others to treat you in healthy ways?

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, when the person who hurts me doesn't see the heartbreak, tears, or emotions they are causing, I know You do. You remind me that I am seen and loved. I am not walking alone. As I start the journey of discovering how boundaries are not just a human idea, but Your idea, I know You will guide me every step of the way. Keep my heart tender and humble while at the same time steadfast and open to all You reveal to me. Continue to show me what You have for me personally in the pages ahead. In Jesus' name, amen.

CHAPTER 2

Naming the Tension That We've All Been Wrestling With

I didn't know what to do anymore. No matter how much I wanted this friendship to work, it wasn't working. Parts of it were good. But then the parts that weren't working were happening over and over. I was spending so much emotional energy trying to avoid another issue that it was becoming increasingly challenging to even enjoy the good times. We had been friends since we were kids, but our lives had gone in dramatically different directions.

It was like going to the beach, looking forward to walking in the sand. There is something so soothing about that for me. But when I step on a sand spur, it stings and momentarily disrupts the beauty of the beach. After hopping around and removing the spur, I walk a little more cautiously for the next couple of steps, but I can

still completely enjoy being there. If, however, the beach sand was filled with spurs, I would stop expecting the sand to be soothing and instead get laser-focused on avoiding getting hurt. The beach still looks beautiful. The sand still looks so promising. But if the realities of that sand prove to be hurtful, it's only reasonable at some point to have more realistic expectations. If the spurs aren't removed from the sand, then walking on the beach will not be a peaceful experience. This seems so obvious with sand spurs.

It was much less obvious in this friendship. I knew there were spurs. I knew the spurs would hurt. But instead of acknowledging that the pain was caused by the presence of spurs, I kept mentally beating myself up for being too sensitive. I can't imagine telling someone who stepped on a sand spur that the problem was her feet. And yet I was doing that to myself when hard relational dynamics hurt my heart.

And then other times I would get so angry and frustrated that I would try to solve the issue by removing the individual spurs from the sand. Never realizing that spurs are what carry the seeds that make more of the original plant. In other words, spurs multiply. Spurs not only won't go away on their own, but they tend to just get worse and worse. The source must be addressed.

It had taken me a long time to admit that.

At first, like I said, I just thought the problem was me. Why was I getting so frustrated? I thought I needed to work on my patience. So, I did. But things didn't get better. So, I thought I needed to work on my expectations. Maybe they were too high? Then I found out that expectations are sometimes simmering resentments in disguise. Ouch. So, I changed my phraseology from "expectations" to "needs and desires." That helped, until it didn't.

Then I thought maybe I was spending too much time with my friend. But when I tried to back off a bit, I was told I was giving too little and acting disconnected. Then I tried to do what she said she

needed but her needs were constantly changing. And what about my needs? I couldn't figure out how to bring up some of my concerns.

When I tried to explain that some things needed to change, even my best points came out wrong. It had all sounded so rational in my head before the conversation, but then the emotion of the moment made me sound so off. I couldn't keep up with the mental gymnastics. So, I wound up apologizing and regretting I'd brought any of this up.

The spurs weren't just something I was stepping on occasionally. Now they were sticking to me regularly and pricking my heart even after I'd left the beach.

It all just kept swirling in my mind. I kept telling myself it was possible to figure this out. I bounced from feeling angry with my friend to angry with myself. And then things would get a little better. When things were good, they were really good. When they were nice, they were so nice. When they were fun, they were lots of fun.

But then an expectation she had would arise during a phone call or a lunch together or even in a simple text exchange, and I would know the cycle of chaos was about to return. It was as if I'd never tried to address any of this in the first place.

Good, great, confusing, worse, much worse. Feeling bad about myself. Feeling bad about her. Not wanting to feel at all. Staring at the ceiling. Good again, great again, confusing again, worse again, and much worse again. Feeling even worse about myself. Feeling even worse about her. Not wanting to feel at all on even greater levels. Staring at the ceiling. On and on it went. For years.

I finally had to realize that to continue to try and solve the problem *was* part of the problem. Albert Einstein is reported to have said, "If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it." I was doing the opposite. I was spending so much time trying to resolve the individual issues that I'd never properly defined the overarching problem.

The problem wasn't that I had needs and desires that weren't getting met. My friend probably did as well. It wasn't even that we didn't try to talk about each of our needs and desires. The real issue was I started to resent the amount of emotional access to my life I had given to her. If you are a highlighting kind of person, swipe some yellow across that word *access*. It's a big one. It's especially big if we are knee deep in a close relationship and we start feeling unheard, unsafe, uncared for, taken advantage of, or made to pay consequences for choices that we had no control over.

We know access must be carefully protected with so many other things in our lives.

We know this with our homes, cars, bank accounts, social media accounts, and even the streaming accounts we use to watch movies. We have keys. We have passwords. It would never be wise to grant access to others without first being sure that they would be appropriately responsible with that access. I've never heard someone say, "She is so selfish and unchristian for not freely giving out her keys and passwords to her whole neighborhood." Just because someone lives close by doesn't mean we can assume they will be responsible with complete access.

If we give a neighbor a key to our front door, it's because we trust they understand how to be responsible with that kind of access. And if there is an indication that our neighbor isn't being responsible with the access we've given them, we know restricting that access is wise.

I haven't been as wise about understanding how to guard my heart. Maybe this has been a problem for many of us.

Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." I've often heard this verse taught in the context of dating relationships and purity. But I think it also applies to guarding the access to our hearts in other relationships as well. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for guard, *mišmār*, communicates

an active nature of how someone should guard.¹ What this means is that guarding is active, not passive. We aren't trying to protect ourselves *from* love. If we love, we will risk being hurt. But we are trying to protect ourselves *for* love. We don't want to get so consumed with the pain and chaos of unhealthy relationship patterns that we become a carrier of human hurt rather than a conduit of God's love.

Love can be unconditional but relational access never should be. God loves us but He has established that sin causes separation from Him. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were no longer given the same kind of access. What started out as a lot of access to God, with one boundary in the garden of Eden, changed because of sin. And as I keep reading through the Bible, the more the sins of humanity increased, the more the access was decreased, and the more boundaries were given. In Genesis chapter 2 there was one boundary, but as we near the end of the Law and Prophets there are 613.²

Then, as we keep reading through the Bible, the access to God became more restricted and conditional. His love was unconditional but access to Him was not.

Here are some important scriptures to consider:

Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.

But your iniquities have separated
you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear. (Isaiah 59:1–2)

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened. (Psalm
66:18 ESV)

Love can be unconditional but relational access never should be.

Notice that the words *sin* and *iniquity* are both used in these verses. I am more familiar with sin but not as much with iniquity.

As I studied this, I discovered iniquity points to the character or motivation of the action more than the action itself. So, it's not just what someone does or doesn't do; it's what her actions represent. I think this is where things can get so confusing when we know something someone is doing is hurtful to us, but we can't pinpoint it as sin. It may even contribute to our relationship feeling a little "off"—like something isn't quite right. That's why I'm so grateful the Bible also addresses iniquity, which gets into the nuances of hurtful issues within human relationships that don't clearly point to sin. Reread the verses above and notice that both sin and iniquity have consequences that change the access God allows in His relationships.

What we are looking for are patterns of hurtful and harmful behavior. A hurtful statement can be called a mistake. But a repeated pattern of hurtful statements or uncaring attitudes or even unjust expectations is much more than a mistake. These patterns are misuses of the purposes of a relationship. Why is this so crucial to understand? Because unchecked misuse of a relationship can quickly turn into abuse in a relationship.

A recent Christianity.com article I came across sums up this dangerous progression so well: "Continued iniquity leads to irregular desires, which leads to a degenerate mind. Romans 1:28–32 describes this deviation in graphic detail."³ When I turned in my Bible to look at what this passage said, I was shocked at what this progression can actually lead to:

Unchecked misuse of a relationship can quickly turn into abuse in a relationship.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

I know this is heavy stuff. And you may be thinking, “Whoa, Lysa, I’m just trying to figure out a few wonky relationship dynamics. I don’t really want to get into all this iniquity and sin stuff.” I can feel that way too. But it’s crucial to understand how this plays out on a biblical level so we can properly guard our hearts.

Like I said before, boundaries aren’t just a good idea, they are a God idea.

We’ve already talked about how God established boundaries from the very beginning. But what about an example of God using boundaries to guard access? When the temple was constructed, those given the greatest access (the high priests) were also called to the highest standard of purity and responsibility necessary to enter the holy of holies. If they violated God’s established boundary and entered the holy of holies without being properly cleansed and purified, death was the consequence.

When Jesus came to make atonement for our sins, we were forgiven, *and* we are also required to live lives where forgiveness is given and received in our relationships with others. Ongoing and unrepented sins still have consequences. God offers all people love, but not all people will have access to life in eternity with Him. Why? Because sin separates. So, if we never repent of our sins and accept the new hearts that come through salvation in Christ, the wages of sin are eternal separation from God.

With all of this in mind, sin and iniquity not only cause separation with God but between people as well.

Like God, we must require from people the responsibility necessary to grant the amount of access we allow them to have in our lives. Too much access without the correct responsibility is detrimental.

Please reread that last sentence and let it soak in. That is the tension we've all been wrestling with in relationships, that we've never quite been able to put our finger on—granting too much access without the correct level of responsibility.

But think of how much clarity we could have by just asking ourselves these questions: Have we required people to be responsible with the amount of access we've granted them? And, do we have the appropriate consequences in place to help hold them accountable if they violate our boundaries?

If we've given them level-ten access but they are only willing or capable of level-three responsibility, that's the real source of the problem. The mistake I've made is trying to get the other person to increase their responsibility. And if they refuse, I've just felt so stuck.


Now, instead of feeling stuck because I can't control the choices of the other person, I take control of reducing the access to the level of responsibility they are capable of. That solution is called a boundary.

Like God, we must require from people the responsibility necessary to grant the amount of access we allow them to have in our lives.

Setting a boundary is being responsible enough to reduce the access we grant to others based on their ability to be responsible with that access. People who are irresponsible with our hearts should not be granted great access to our hearts. And the same is true for all other kinds of access as well—physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial.

For example, we are a very close-knit family, and my girls and I love sharing clothes. But we've had to establish a new policy around access to our closets. Well, level 10 (complete) access wasn't working and led to a lot of frustration when something went missing or came back damaged. Now, if we want to wear something, we send a text asking to borrow an item and stating when it will be returned. So, the level of access to each other's closets had to be adjusted with these implemented guidelines to maintain respect and, ultimately, keep our dynamics healthy.

Or, maybe you have a friend you spend a lot of time with and you give her details about hard situations you are walking through. But, over and over, she slips and shares those details you didn't want shared with others. The more this happens, the more unsafe you start to feel. Even when you address the problem, it still happens. So, if you don't want details shared, you'll have to reduce the access you give to the more private aspects of your life. This may include deciding ahead of time what topics you are willing to talk about when you get together and not deviating from that decision in a moment of vulnerability.



People who are irresponsible
with our hearts should
not be granted great
access to our hearts.

— *lys*

Or, maybe in your marriage you've trusted your spouse to pay your car insurance bill each quarter. But then on vacation, both of your phones are suddenly bombarded with urgent calls that your insurance is about to get dropped due to delinquent payments. After a serious conversation about what could have happened had the insurance been canceled, and the fact that other bills have been late, too, you both realize you should assume a more active role in bill paying. Obviously, this isn't a deal breaker in your overall trust within your marriage, but it does shed light on the reality that a shift needs to be made so tensions don't continue to rise in this area. It's not that your spouse can't access accounts, but because they were irresponsible with bill paying, safeguards need to be put in place where they are no longer in charge of paying the bills. That's reduced access. Ultimately, you may both decide it's better for you to step back in and schedule the household payments. Then your spouse would be free to grow and excel and exhibit responsibility in other areas.

Bottom line: God established boundaries to protect intimacy, not decimate it. And we should do the same. How to do this appropriately is what this entire message is about.

As we close this chapter, I want you to know three things. First, you are not alone in your struggles. I haven't met even one person who has truly mastered all that we've been talking about. You aren't a relationship failure just because you have relational hardships. You are full of potential and so are those you are in relationship with.

Second, I know part of what makes this complicated is that usually by the time we realize we need boundaries, we are carrying hurt. I want to acknowledge your hurt just like I want others to acknowledge mine. While we want to acknowledge the pain, we don't want to use any part of this message to perpetuate more pain. Boundaries aren't meant to be weaponized. They are meant to be used to prioritize keeping relationships safe.

And last, there is a big difference between difficult relationships and destructive relationships. We will address this important distinction in later chapters, but if you are being abused, please get help immediately from safe, trained professionals.

If the problems in your relationships look more like hurricanes than sand spurs, be honest about that. That's why sometimes we need good boundaries and sometimes we need goodbyes. We will leave space in this book for both to be acknowledged and addressed.

You and I are going to make it through this, friend. And in the end, we will be more equipped and eager to love others without betraying ourselves in the process. That's the best way to honor God's design for love. And that's really what all this is about.

A note from Jim on access

Allowing someone access without accountability will eventually lead to abandonment. If I give you unlimited access to me and there's no accountability, either I'm going to leave the relationship, or you will. If someone perpetually acts out, that person *has* abandoned the relationship. Remember: If you don't have clear rules—if you don't set boundaries for the relationship—then you'll be ruled by the other person. You just may not know it.

Now, Let's Live This . . .

REMEMBER:

- Love can be unconditional but relational access never should be.
- Unchecked misuse of a relationship can quickly turn into abuse in a relationship.
- Like God, we must require from people the responsibility necessary to grant the amount of access we allow them to have in our lives.
- People who are irresponsible with our hearts should not be granted great access to our hearts.

RECEIVE:

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it. (Proverbs 4:23)

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:28–32)

REFLECT:

- Explain this concept in your own words: “Love can be unconditional but relational access never should be.”
- What might it look like if you were to require the level of responsibility from others that matches the amount of access you've given them?

PRAYER:

God, as I process the relationships that have caused hurt in my life, keep my heart turned toward You. Remind me that boundaries are meant to protect intimacy, not decimate it. Father, I hand You my deepest fears and anxieties because of my difficult relationships. I trust You to lead me with clarity in the right direction. Thank You for everything You're revealing to me personally right now. In Jesus' name, amen.