

# Jesus Set Boundaries

## A Soul Shepherding Bible Study

By Bill Gaultiere © 1998, 2012

We talk with pastors, leaders, counselors, parents and other care-givers who are struggling to be “cheerful givers” (2 Corinthians 9:7). In their helping of others they’ve become tired, stressed, or burned out. Problems with setting boundaries are a main reason why many pastors and leaders experience overwhelming ministry stress and eventually burnout.

Most people are surprised when I show them from the Bible examples of Jesus setting boundaries and practicing personal soul care. It’s no wonder we overdo in ministry, get worn out, and even burnout! Jesus had far more stress, far more pressure, and far more responsibility than any of us and yet he remained relaxed, joyful, and generous with people. [Jesus’ Rhythm of Life](#) is for us.

Before we consider the Scriptures on Jesus’ way of life let’s make sure that we understand what our boundaries are and their importance to us and our relationship with the Lord.

### Why Setting Boundaries is Important

Personal boundaries are what define your identity. They’re like the property lines around a home. This is my property and that is not my property. This is me — what I value, am good at, believe, need, or feel — and that is not me.

To know yourself and be secure that you are loved is essential to all relationships and activities. The better your boundaries of self-awareness and self-definition are *the greater your capacity to offer empathy and love to others*. Good boundaries help you to care for others because you have a stable foundation to operate from and are not distracted or depleted by personal insecurities or blind spots. (That’s why it’s not “selfish” or unloving to have boundaries and “take care of yourself.”)

It’s especially important for pastors, ministry leaders, and other care-givers to learn to set limits for their own soul care. First of all, because they have needs to be loved and respected as much as anyone else! Secondly, because a ministry leader with weak (poorly defined or insecure) boundaries will eventually become so stressed or emotionally depleted as to be ineffective or inappropriate in helping others. (Boundary problems are why pastors “fall.”)

### Problems Setting Boundaries

Tired care-givers often have trouble saying no and avoid speaking the truth in love. They are more readily drawn into trying to rescue other people and without realizing it may end up enabling selfish or irresponsible behavior in the people they’re trying to help. They may get so enmeshed with the people they care for, trying to continually to please them and walking on

eggshells for fear of upsetting them, that they “lose themselves.” They lose track of what they need and what’s important to them or what God has called them to do. At some point they may realize that they’re not being their true, God created and God redeemed self.

Usually people who minister to others as pastors or counselors are sensitive-hearted and prone to take on other people’s problems. If they don’t have clear personal boundaries and limits they get weighed down and walked on. Eventually they start having problems with anger, resentment, stress overload, or burn out. They just can’t continue being so helpful and caring all the time!

### **I Thought it wasn’t Nice to Say No**

In the early years of my ministry as a counselor and pastor, like many Christian leaders, I had the problem of feeling guilty if I set boundaries. I thought I had to say yes to what people felt they needed from me. I tried to please people and make them happy — I never wanted *anyone* to be disappointed or upset with me. To me it seemed selfish or “not nice” to say no to people with hurts and needs.

Finally I realized that I was not experiencing Jesus’ words, “It’s more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). The problem was *me!* I was not a cheerful giver. I was giving out of compulsion and emptiness and wasn’t experiencing *the grace of God abounding to me* so that I could become a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7-9). I wasn’t looking to God enough, but was relying on myself to do more to help other people.

My pressured, enmeshed, and selfless way of helping others was causing me to be more and more anxious, depressed, and angry.

### **Setting Boundaries in Jesus’ Way (Why he didn’t Burnout!)**

One of the things that helped turn me around before I totally burned out was to look prayerfully at the life of Jesus. I studied the gospels carefully and learned some things that surprised me because I hadn’t been taught them in church. I saw Jesus setting boundaries repeatedly.

I discovered that in his humanity Jesus had limitations that he accepted in a *relaxed way*. Like being in a human body that needed nourishment and rest and could only be in one place at a time. Like there only being 24-hours in a day. (Unlike the ambitious, overworking leaders I’ve talked with Jesus didn’t try to accomplish 26 hours of activity in a 24 hour day.)

Jesus had personal needs that he put priority on — sometimes even over the needs of other people — and he did so without feeling guilty. Primarily his personal soul care had to do with separating himself from people to be alone with God, who he called “Abba” (Papa). Jesus lived in a rhythm of life that not only kept him free from burn out, but far beyond that it kept him *full of God*, full of grace and truth, and therefore ready and able to be compassionate and generous in his response to people, their needs, interruptions, and crisis situations.

Unlike many devoted servants of the Lord, Jesus did not live on the defensive, overextending himself and getting more and more tired and then finally taking a break. Instead, Jesus lived on

the offensive in dealing with temptation and Satan. He was proactive in that he consistently invested in his intimacy with Abba and this gave him energy and focus. Jesus lived by the principle that [Ministry Begins with Rest](#) and so he was never in danger of burnout.

Another thing I saw in the gospels is that Jesus wasn't always nice to people. Often he didn't do what people wanted him to do. There were many people he didn't help. And whenever he did help other people he expected them to do their part. For instance, even in Jesus' miracles he asked people to do something, usually something they felt they couldn't do. (The blind man had to walk a long way to get to the pool of Siloam to wash the mud out of his eyes.)

These understandings about Jesus' way of life helped me to trust that it was right (not only healthy, but also holy) for me to learn how to say no to people, speak the truth in love, and live within my personal limitations.

### **A Bible Study on Examples of Jesus Setting Boundaries**

In outline form I'd like to share with you some of the key points of my Bible study on Jesus Setting Boundaries. This is the same outline I've used in many classes I've taught to pastors, church counselors, and other ministry leaders on setting limits and learning to be joyful givers. I encourage you to look up the Scriptures and study their contexts and other related passages from the Bible. Meditate and pray. Ask Jesus to teach you to live your life in the way that he would if he were you.

#### **Jesus, in his Incarnation, had Limits that he Accepted**

- **Basic Needs.** He ate healthy foods, got the sleep he needed and even took naps, took time to relax, and did a lot of walking (Matt 4:6-7; 26:18, 20; John 12:2).
- **Support from Friends.** He sought the company of friends (Matt 26:36-38).
- **Solitude.** He withdrew from the crowds to go away on retreat, alone or with friends (see [Jesus' Rhythm of Life](#) for many Scriptures that show this).
- **Singular Focus (This people, this place, this time).** He left one city to go to another because he couldn't be in two places at the same time (Mark 1:38).
- **Pace of Life.** He was never in a hurry, except to go to Jerusalem and embrace his cross (John 11:6; Mark 10:32).
- **Abandon Outcomes.** Jesus was tempted to become paralyzed with fear about the cross. Satan and his demons, along with many people who hated him, were trying to kill him. Would he make it to the cross to be die for us, to be "lifted up" publicly so as it draw people to God? He let go. He chose not to force things, but to trust the Father's will. He abandoned to the Father the outcomes of his sufferings and trials to come, as he always did. (Mark 14:32-42)

### Jesus Said No to Inappropriate Behavior

- **Demands.** He withdrew from the crowds who wanted him, for one-on-one time with the Father (Luke 5:15-16).
- **Abuse.** He fought his way through the crowd that was trying to throw him off a cliff for claiming to be the Messiah (Luke 4:28-30).
- **Entitlement.** He didn't give in to his mother and brothers who tried to use their relationship with him to pull him away from the crowd he was ministering to (Matthew 12:46-50).
- **Baiting Questions.** When the religious leaders asked him baiting questions to make him look foolish he answered with incisive questions of his own (Matthew 21:23-27, 22:15-22).
- **Cynicism.** He said no to Herod's mocking demand, "Show us a sign that you are the Son of God." (Luke 23:8-9).
- **Manipulation.** He said no to Peter and the disciples who had an inappropriate agenda for Jesus to a political king or military warrior rather than a sacrificial lamb. (Matthew 16:23).
- **Pride.** He didn't heal those who were too proud to trust Him (Matthew 13:58).

### Jesus Spoke the Truth in Love to those Stuck or Wrong

- **Exploitation.** He used a whip to clear out the temple of the vendors and money changers who were taking advantage of the poor and turning God's house into a marketplace (Matthew 21:12-17, John 2:12-16).
- **Addiction.** He told the Rich Young Ruler that he couldn't help him until he gave away the money that was controlling him (Matthew 19:16-21).
- **Misguided.** He rebuked the disciples who tried to keep the little children away from him and told them that they needed to emulate the children's faith (Matthew 19:13-15).

### Jesus Had Expectations for People in Need

- **What do you want?** Two blind men called out to him for help from the Jericho road. He asked them, "What do you want me to do for you?" They needed to ask for what they needed and they needed to trust Him (Matthew 20:29-34).
- **Do you want to get well?** For 38 years the invalid at the Sheep gate pool hadn't been able to get into the miracle waters. He felt helpless and sorry for himself. He expected someone to fix his problem. Jesus challenged him, "Do you want to get well?... Get

up! Pick up your mat and walk.” It was up to him to be motivated and to take responsibility for himself (John 5:1-14).

- **Do you believe?** A father sought deliverance for his son who was mute and had seizures and said to Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” Jesus put it back on the father, “If you can? Everything is possible for him who believes.” The father needed to believe that Jesus could cure his son (Mark 9:17-27).

#### **Jesus Offered Grace and Truth According to the Need (John 8:1-11)**

- **The humble and broken.** To the woman caught in adultery he offered grace (“Neither do I condemn you.”) and truth (“Go and sin no more.”).
- **The proud and self-righteous.** To the Pharisees who tried to condemn this woman and to trap Jesus he listened (grace) and then confronted their pride and scapegoating with the truth (“Let him who is without sin throw the first stone.”)

#### **Jesus Taught us Examples of how to be Setting Boundaries**

- **Personal Prayer Time:** “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen” (Matthew 6:6).
- **Be Honest and Direct (Don’t Pressure People or Try to Get Them to Do Things):** “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37).
- **Set Priorities:** “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Luke 16:13).
- **Please God, Not People:** “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44).
- **Obey God:** “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “‘The first,’ they answered” (Matthew 21:28-31).

~

*Soul Shepherding is a 501c3 nonprofit ministry to pastors and leaders supported by tax-deductible [donations](#). In addition to articles like this, we offer counseling and spiritual care for pastors, pastors’ wives, and missionaries who often cannot afford the help they need. When ministry leaders are helped it makes a great difference for dozens, hundreds, even thousands of other people.*

Bill Gaultiere, Ph.D. & Kristi Gaultiere, Psy.D. ~ [Soul Shepherding](#) ~ Irvine, CA