

Pleasant Places, Part 4
Living with Healthy, Biblical Boundaries
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We are in the fourth week of our sermon series entitled *Pleasant Places* from Psalm 16:6, “*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.*” In the introductory sermon we walked through all of Psalm 16 which consistently showed us the importance of boundary-setting in our lives. In week two we looked at the importance of setting a boundary between the past and the present – setting a clear boundary in favor of our own physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual health that we are not going to allow ourselves or anyone else the extended opportunity to hold our past against us. *Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new is here!* (2 Cor. 5:17). Last week we looked at the boundary between want and need as we moved through Matthew chapters 3 and 4. One of the examples I used last week was sharing my confession that when I get my next car, I had convinced myself that I needed heated seats. Then my car went in the shop the very next day and I had to rent a car for several days so I could get to work. My rental car had heated seats – and it was 60 degrees out! When I got my car back (thanks be to God it is working well again), the temperature went back to normal winter temperatures! This is God’s sense of humor! Listen: If we want to mature in our relationship with God, we have to learn to not need what we merely want and learn to want only that which we truly need.

In the first week I presented objections that people have to setting boundaries. I want to repeat these because the boundary for today is going to bring some of these objections back to the surface.

1. *Can I set limits and still be a loving person?*
2. *What are legitimate boundaries?*
3. *What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries?*
4. *How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?*
5. *Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?*
6. *Aren’t boundaries selfish?*

Maybe you’ve already been struggling with some of these as you have tried to set new boundaries in your life. Don’t give in! Boundaries are biblical. Jesus set boundaries. We need to do the same if we want to live like he did, embracing who God made us to be and what God has made us to do – with less stress, more peace, and more joy!

Today we are going to learn about the boundary between helping and hurting. Helping and hurting – or we could say it this way – helping vs. enabling. Let’s pray: *Father God, we need your Holy Spirit to come to help us learn what you want us to learn, to give us courage to apply what you teach us, and to bring us peace when we follow your instructions. We are so dependent on our feelings, even more so than dependent on your Word sometimes. Forgive us. Help us. We want to be more like our Savior, Jesus Christ. Open your Word for us now so that we may hear and know and understand and obey. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Helping is coming alongside someone to support them in something they need to do, or doing something for someone that he/she is not capable of doing on their own. Enabling is doing for someone things that he/she could and should be doing on their own. The enabler is a person who recognizes that a negative circumstance is occurring on a regular basis and yet continues to help the person with the problem persist with detrimental behaviors. Enabling creates an atmosphere in which the person we think we are helping can comfortably continue unacceptable, harmful behavior. It is not helping, it is hurting.

This boundary hits all of us because around us are people who don’t have the money to live and provide basic necessities for themselves, around us are people who are using whatever money they have to buy alcohol and drugs or a seat at the gambling table, and around us are

people whose attitudes or behaviors are unkind, self-absorbed, aloof, or essentially coming from an unhealthy place of need vs. want.

We all struggle with this boundary when we are coming out of a parking lot and there is someone standing there with signs like these:



What are we to do? What are we, as your Mission & Outreach Committee supposed to do when the same requests come in over and over again? Or maybe you have neighbors or relatives that fall into this category and you just don't know what to do. We struggle with this because as Christians we know that the Bible repeatedly teaches us to give to the poor. Jesus was very clear about this. Look with me at the Scripture from Luke 4. This is right after Jesus had come out of the wilderness for the 40 days of temptation:

"When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Surely a shiver must have been felt in the worshipping body that day. They knew these words had been prophesied by Isaiah 700+ years before. Is it possible that a King was coming who would bring forth justice, peace, and righteousness unlike anything the world had seen before? Would there be a King who could bring healing like this, including true help for the poor whom he said would always be with us? Yes! Jesus said, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* "I am the King of kings, and the Lord of lords and I am using my power to fix everything that sin has ruined." We, as Christ's body here on earth are called to continue this work. We have been commanded to follow our King's footsteps into places of brokenness, oppression, and poverty.

The average American lives on more than \$90 per day, yet approximately one billion people live on less than one dollar per day, and 2.6 billion (40%) of the world's population live on less than two dollars per day. Our poorest neighbors have so much more than the poorest of the poor in countries all over the world. 1 John 3:16-18 tells us, *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."*

But how do we know? How do we know if our \$20 is going to be used for necessary items like food and a warm coat instead of a bottle of whiskey? How do we know if paying someone's electric bill is just enabling them to shirk their responsibility of managing their own needs vs. wants? How do we know if we are helping or hurting – immediate vs. long term, temporary vs. eternal?

If you think I'm going to give you a clear answer . . . I'm sorry. I can't. But it is important to realize that there is no clear answer. It is important to accept that there is no clear answer, no right formula. Helping those in need is always good. But how to help is the key. In this circumstance right now, should we help by paying the electric bill? We don't want the electric to be shut off. It's winter. The pipes will freeze and then they will have even more problems. But in this circumstance is that the better outcome than creating an atmosphere in which the person we think we are helping can comfortably continue unacceptable, harmful behavior – moving them further and further away from living by God's instructions? Even if they don't have a relationship with God? Even if they don't believe in God? But do we want unbelievers to think

that God rewards unhealthy choices? Do we want them to think of God and the Church as a Santa Claus? Do we want them to think of God as only One you run to when you're in trouble? Here's \$40. Here's \$60. Here's \$100. How long is that going to last? How much is that going to help? How is God being revealed in that act of generosity?

The answer is, we don't know. We don't know. Over the years we have spent a lot of our offerings helping people get out of jams. We always want to err on the side of generosity, always, and so we have undoubtedly hurt instead of helped in certain circumstances. But we do try to look long-term. We do work hard to get people the tools they need to get out of the circumstances they are in. And that has happened over and over again. But it is a person by person decision. It is a prayerful decision. It is necessary to look at a whole story, not just the snapshot at the moment. **It is necessary to listen to the Holy Spirit's answer when we ask the question, "What do you want me to do here? How can I help here?"** Because if we have what someone else needs, truly needs, and do not offer it, how can the love of God be in us? In some ways – the boundary is very permeable, isn't it? But the thing is, only God truly knows what is helping vs. hurting. So, our boundary is: Ask God. Gather facts if possible. Listen (to God and to others). Obey. Give thanks. Let go.

Now, what about helping vs. enabling a person with a problem to persist with harmful, detrimental behaviors? We are so good at talking about someone's problem with someone other than the person with the problem. We are not good at confrontation, we say. "I will avoid it at all costs," we say. At the cost of keeping someone in their sin? At the cost of allowing them to continue to hurt themselves and people around them day after day, month after month, year after year? Is there a difference between confrontation and speaking the truth in love? You bet there is. Confrontation is coming at a person head-on with the goal being that we have gotten our point across. It's about control. It's about me and my way. Speaking the truth in love is still confrontation, it is coming at a person head-on, but the goal is not about us it is about Christ. It is about the body of Christ. It is about helping someone strive for biblical behavior and maturity. It is about love as much as it is about truth.*

I learned this lesson in my first call at the Presbyterian Church in Shippensburg. The senior pastor had been at the church about the same length of time I've been here – about 17 years. By his own admission, he had grown weary and focused on structures rather than people. This all came off to others as disinterest. He came off as aloof and uncaring – which wasn't the case – that's just how it was felt by the people. Well, what started to happen was that people started coming to me in moments of need instead of to him. Couples were asking me for their premarital counseling instead of him. People started complaining to me about their long-time pastor. Though I was already in my early 40's, I was 'green' as a pastor, and didn't know what to do other than to listen and to pray. Behind the scenes however was my colleague watching his long-time congregants bypass him for the new kid in town, and he was beginning to feel hurt and angry not just with them but with me, too.

What should I have done? By not going to him with the issues that people were bringing up to me about his perceived personal distance from them, I was enabling the behavior. But I was afraid of what he would say. I was afraid of what he would do. I was afraid of hurting his feelings. I was afraid he wouldn't trust me anymore as his colleague. Fear kept me from speaking the truth in love. Fear. And anytime fear is ruling our decisions, we have given the devil a foothold. And the end result for me? I left my position and lived in pain and regret for a long time myself - and I left a lot of pain and regret behind in my colleague and former congregation as well. Helping vs. hurting. Helping vs. enabling. I didn't understand the boundary then. I understand it now.

My mom drank a lot at night. Things could get pretty rough. After I was married, sometimes the phone would ring at 8 or 9 p.m. It was mom, with a slurred speech, talking about anything and everything. Often it would turn to criticizing me or my family, and I would end up hurt and angry for the rest of the night. Then one day I set my boundary. "Mom, I love you. But when you call me at night and you've been drinking, I don't want to talk to you. I'll talk to you

any other time, but not like this.” And then I hung up. I was enabling a behavior that was hurting her and hurting me and hurting our relationship. She didn’t call me again in the evenings, and I did not perceive that what I said caused further harm to our relationship. How I wished I had set that boundary years before!

We have to learn to speak the truth even when we think there will be suffering to follow. If we don’t, we are getting in the way of what God wants to do in someone’s life. Romans 5 gives us the sequence, “*Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us ...*”. If we are withholding the truth from someone because we are afraid of the consequence to ourselves, we have to remember what we are withholding from the person in front of us: endurance, character, and hope. If I don’t have the biblical strength and integrity to say to you that your unbiblical behavior is destructive to others, to yourself, and to the church as a whole, then I shouldn’t be yours or anyone else’s pastor. This is a lesson God made sure I understood before he sent me here. But it took suffering to put it all together.

Sometimes people want to help others by giving them a PIECE of their mind. When you feel this way, as a Christian, STOP. Chances are really good that you will not be helping, you will be hurting yourself and others. STOP. Walk away. Breathe. Pray. Until you have PEACE in your mind and heart, no one needs a piece of either.

What I hope you are hearing in all of this is that the main responsibility we have in helping vs. hurting is to be in a close relationship with the LORD. We must seek his counsel in order to know what someone truly needs. Is it their irresponsibility or is it our responsibility that needs attention? Learning this boundary comes through constant communication with the Lord. Sometimes we need to admit that the main problem in a lot of these circumstances, in a lot of the relationships that you’re thinking about right now – the main problem is – us. The main problem is the part we’re playing in stepping in to soften the blow of the consequences that come from the choices others make.

Whether that’s having to do with money or behaviors, the solution begins and ends with Jesus, for us and for others, whether they realize it yet or not. I’m so grateful for Jesus. What would we do without Jesus? How could we experience any kind of freedom from the chains Satan is constantly trying to wrap around us apart from Jesus? How could we be forgiven or choose to forgive without Jesus?

In this moment, God wants you to forgive yourself for enabling destructive behavior in others. You thought you were doing the loving thing. Forgive yourself and ask God to help you do his will in the future. In this moment, God wants you to choose to forgive others who have caused pain to you and to others you care about because a clear boundary wasn’t set between what was appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In this moment, forgive. In this moment, God is asking us to welcome people into our lives who will speak the truth in love to us so that we can all live with LESS STRESS, MORE PEACE, AND MORE JOY! Amen? Amen.

**Ephesians 4:11-16, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”*