

## Understanding Boundaries in Marriage By Debbie Preece

If you are living with a difficult or irresponsible spouse, *Boundaries in Marriage*, by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. Johnson Townsend, may be just what you need to turn your marriage around. Drs. Cloud and Townsend are the premier authorities on boundaries and have written many books on the subject including the best seller, *Boundaries*, *Boundaries with Kids*, and more.

The purpose of setting boundaries is fundamentally about love – promoting it, growing it, and repairing it. We all want and need love, and love was our primary motivation in getting married. But just as we cannot force a garden to grow and produce beautiful flowers, love cannot be coerced either. However, if it is given the right conditions and environment, love will naturally blossom and develop. Setting boundaries is what creates the right environment for love to be nurtured: one of freedom and responsibility.

First of all, setting boundaries is NOT about fixing, changing, or punishing your mate. It is about self-control and taking ownership over your *own* life so that you are protected and you can protect your spouse without enabling or rescuing him/her. So what *is* a boundary then? In its simplest sense, a boundary is like a property line that denotes ownership. It defines where something begins and ends. Similarly, relationship boundaries define ownership over such things as feelings, attitudes, and behavior. If there is a problem with one of these things, we need to know to whom the problem “belongs.” For example, Joe says that Mary makes him angry because she always nags him. Mary retorts that she nags because he never helps her around the house. In each case, they are blaming each other instead of taking ownership for their own feelings or behavior. Joe blames his anger on Mary, and Mary blames her nagging on Joe. Back and forth the Ping-Pong and bitterness of accusation goes.

If we don't understand what feelings, attitudes or behaviors we are responsible for, there is no incentive to work at changing them either. Boundaries are what help us to recognize what does and does not belong to us. When Joe comes to understand that his anger is “his problem” and not Mary's, he will realize that his anger is under his control and not controlled by what Mary does. Similarly, Mary needs to take ownership for her nagging instead of blaming it on Joe.

By recognizing that we do indeed have control over our own issues, we gain a sense of freedom and power instead of feeling victimized by others. Also, we become aware of options other than our usual way of reacting or behaving. For instance, instead of automatically becoming angry when Mary nags him, Joe could respond in a different way. Maybe he could request that she approach him differently when she needs help. Mary, too, can change her response to Joe's

lack of helpfulness. Perhaps she could hire help instead of asking Joe. (Joe may be more motivated to help when it hits him in the wallet.) These are just a couple examples of ways that they can respond differently to each other. The point is that once we realize that we have control over our own problems, then a whole new world of possibility opens up to us instead of feeling trapped in the vicious cycle of frustration and blame.

As we gain awareness into our own issues and practice taking responsibility for them in our marriages, we grow spiritually and in our own self-respect. Likewise, by setting proper boundaries and creating the environment for our spouse to take responsibility for his or her own problems, he or she will also grow. As they do, our love and respect for them will naturally blossom as well.

Condensed from "Boundaries in Marriage" by Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend.