

HOW TO SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES TO KEEP YOURSELF SAFE

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 12 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, Rachel and I are going to be talking about boundaries and just everything boundaries: What boundaries are, how we set them, how we cross other people's boundaries, how they cross ours. And so we're going to start by... First of all, hi, Rachel.

RACHEL: Hey.

NATALIE: I want all of you to know she's actually here. I'm going to kick off the podcast though by just explaining what boundaries are, and this is kind of a paraphrase or a spinoff of Henry Cloud and John Townsend's explanation of boundaries in their book called — guess what — “Boundaries.” And that book next to the Bible, I think everyone in the whole wide world should read the book “Boundaries.”

RACHEL: Absolutely.

NATALIE: I don't know what's next on your wishlist, but if you've never read that book, that should be on your wishlist. Okay, so this is kind of how I explain boundaries, and it's a spinoff of how they explain it. Close your eyes and imagine that you have a house and yard with a fence around it. And think about a neighborhood. Every individual person has their very own house and yard, and who's in charge of your house and your yard? You are, right? And who's in charge of your neighbor's house and yard? They are.

So what happens when a person comes over without asking, just invites himself over into your yard, and starts rearranging your rose garden? Maybe they start taking out some roses and they start planting tulips because tulips are their favorite. That's a crossing of boundaries. And just like we would never allow our neighbor to do that, we'd come out and we'd probably say, “Hey, um, excuse me, but you can't... I like roses and I want roses in my garden. You can't just come in here. If you like tulips, that's groovy, but you need to go over to your garden and plant tulips in your garden, not in my garden.”

Okay, we understand that, but when it comes to other parts of our life, we have a hard time understanding what boundaries are and how they work. And in fact, there's a kind

of a religious teaching out there that says that, “Well, if you're a Christian, you can't even have boundaries. That's not even a Christian thing to do.” So Rachel, that explanation of boundaries, does that make sense to you?

RACHEL: It does. I have been through a long process of learning at the ripe old age of thirty-three what this looks like, because, Natalie, I just want to say I was probably the least boundaried person you've ever come across. And I think it stemmed from just not having a sense of self and not knowing that I was allowed to stand up for who I was and not even knowing really who I was — like, having an idea, but then not living it out. So just basically allowing the world to tell me who I was and what I should do. And that especially manifested itself in my marriage, and it was utterly unhealthy in so many different ways.

And so a year out from the divorce being final and having been separated from my husband for even longer than that, I'm still learning what this looks like. And I'm so thankful, though, I get the chance to do that and learn it better late than never. And I cringe looking back at all the ways that my lack of boundaries manifested itself in my life and what I allowed people to do and what I did without a good concept of what this looked like.

NATALIE: Did you ever feel like if you did set up boundaries that you were being mean — that was kind of a mean thing to do?

RACHEL: Yes, and part of what I thought was my identity was I was a nice person and I was a loving person. I thought that was what love was, so it was terrifying, the thought of setting boundaries or standing up for myself, because as I said, I had such a lack of self. So if someone told me that I was mean, then my entire identity was shattered, because it was people-pleasing and et cetera, and it's a whole host of problems that go along with a lack of boundaries. But I was just terrified, because I didn't want to be rejected.

And so there's a fear of abandonment and all that, and it was a completely skewed view of myself and other people and the connection and the status of the way things were between us all. Instead of putting people next to me — we're all brothers and sisters, we're all loved by God — they were all above me. And so that meant they got to just trample all over my roses every day because I needed them to tell me that I was good.

NATALIE: Right. So now when you think about someone who would come into someone else's yard and just start rearranging their flower garden, and then the person who owns the flower garden would come out and say, “Please don't do that. I prefer my

flower garden to look like this," when you look at it from that perspective, which person is the mean person?

RACHEL: Well, it's the one who's trampling over someone else and using whatever sense of entitlement they have to go over and start messing around in someone else's property. So it's this dynamic where both people don't have a good sense of boundaries. What's theirs? What's mine? What am I responsible for? What are they responsible for? And in the case of abusive people, people who use power to lord over others and to exploit others, they may not care, and then they'll manipulate you in order to tell you that you shouldn't care either about what they're doing, because if you do, you're bad, you're mean, you're cruel, you're not a good wife, et cetera.

NATALIE: Right. So if you think about this in terms of mental health, I think that mentally and spiritually healthy adults would have a clear understanding of what they have responsibility for. Like, this garden is my responsibility. I'm responsible for making sure that it's watered, for making sure that I'm deadheading it and taking good care of it, but also for making sure that it looks the way I want it to look. And then other people can't come into my garden and take over responsibility of that.

So the kind thing for me to do is to encourage people who want to come over and rearrange my garden or do weird things to it is to say to them, "Hey, you know what? It looks like you really enjoy gardening. You have your own garden, and you need to go and learn how to take really good care of your garden. And if you like tulips, then go plant tulips. And I don't have a right to come over into your garden and say, 'No, I don't like tulips. I like roses,' so you don't have a right to come into my garden and say that."

So really what it is, is it's growing up into adulthood. Because when you think about it, children, in some ways... And we have to teach our children how to have boundaries too, okay? So I'm not saying that children shouldn't have boundaries. They absolutely should have boundaries. And in fact, if we can't model that, what having healthy boundaries is, they're going to have a hard time understanding that themselves. But overall, in general, you can tell a healthy adult by whether or not they have healthy boundaries. And people who are well boundaried actually attract other people who have healthy boundaries. People who don't have healthy boundaries attract people who also don't have healthy boundaries.

So if I'm the kind of person that is, like you were describing, is a... You know, I want everyone to love me, and so I feel like the only way they can love me is if I let them come in and do whatever they want to my garden, then what am I going to do? I'm going to let them come over and do whatever they want to in my garden. I'm going to

let them come into my house and rearrange the furniture. And then I lose my identity. I lose who I am. My property becomes the property of somebody else. And we think that this is Christian? This is so not Christian. It's basically saying, "Well, I'm not going to take responsibility or good stewardship of my home and my yard. I'm going to allow other people to do that." And it's a recipe for disaster.

RACHEL: It is, and I think it's easy to see where the devil twists God's word, which is what he does. So for the example, it's easy to think that this is the way we should be — you know, allow our husband to come in and do all these things to our yard. Because we're supposed to be one flesh, right? We're supposed to become one flesh. That's the idea of marriage. And so that is just a horrific twisting of what God's intentions for people are, I think, because the only way you can be that beautiful, one flesh relationship is if there are two whole people coming together and working together and respecting each other and loving each other. And I think it's really important to get extremely clear on what that looks like, because there is so much deception out there and it's so easy to fall into that trap, especially when we have people who are wanting to come in and take over our lives, and they can twist God's word in order to justify that.

NATALIE: Yep. So I just had a thought. I've never actually thought about this before, but I was thinking about when you were talking about the husband and wife thing. I was thinking that would be almost like two houses and two yards next door to each other, and they have some shared territory, okay? So maybe they share a garden or they share certain things, but there are also things that just belong to them. And the respect for the things that just belong to my husband and his respect for the things that just belong to me is there. But there are also things that we share.

For example, let's just get practical here. Okay, this is a real life example that my husband and I are working through. We bought a king-size bed, but we didn't have any bedding for it. Well, we bought the sheets for it, but we didn't buy any topping thing for it. So we have a topper that fits a queen-size bed, but not a king-size. So we've just kind of been, "Ah, who cares?" We don't care. It's not that big of a deal. But now we're starting to think, "Oh, maybe we should get..." He got a bonus for the new year, and we were just thinking maybe we should get a bedspread or whatever you call those things that fits a king-size bed so that the sides of our bed aren't showing. And we could pick something out together. Right now we're using kind of a mishmash of blankets that belong to him, but they don't really reflect anything of me or whatever, which is fine.

So we thought, "Well, let's pick out something together." Well, our taste is pretty similar, but we're going to work together to pick something out. So that's shared territory,

okay? But it wouldn't be appropriate for one or the other of us to go, "Well, you know what? I get to do this. I'm going to get to pick this out by myself, and I don't really care what you think." Because we're married, we share our bed, we share our bedroom.

But let's say that I'm going to go out and buy a car for myself. And let's say that I have my own funds to do that. Who gets to choose the car that I pick for myself? I do. I do. I mean, I can ask him for help. I can say, "What do you think?" If we're working budget stuff, then of course we have to work budget stuff. But at the end of the day, if this is going to be my car that I'm driving, I'm going to pick the one that best meets my needs, okay? And vice versa, if he's going to be picking out a car that he's going to be driving, he's going to pick one that meets his needs, the color he likes, and the style he likes and whatever.

So, this is what you don't see in a healthy relationship. What you see in an unhealthy relationship is one partner that says, "I'm going to tell you what you are going to drive. I'm going to tell you what you're going to eat. I'm going to tell you who you get to see, where you get to go or not go, what you get to think or not think." That's not healthy.

RACHEL: Yeah, And there can be different degrees of that. Sometimes if it's something they don't care about, they'll let you have your way and look at them — they're being really "generous," right? I was thinking in my former relationship, my husband did not care about the bedding we had, but he cared about the car I drove. I remember car shopping with him and it was horrible. And he also cared about where we would go to eat. So he would give me the choice, but if it wasn't something he wanted, there were going to be consequences. But he would still revel in the fact that I was getting the choice.

NATALIE: Oh my goodness.

RACHEL: So it can be very twisted. It can be very twisted, okay? So I'm realizing now in my life the residue of that effect on me is that sometimes I can't even get in touch with what I really want, because I want to make sure that everyone else is happy. I'm so acquainted with that practice in my mind — making sure, considering what other people want and what's going to make them happy. So I don't even realize what I really want. I'm not in touch with those feelings. So I'm practicing getting used to that and it's sort of uncomfortable, because in the past there were consequences if I asserted myself in that way. A long recovery process for sure.

NATALIE: Yeah. And I think you hit the nail on the head of one of the ways that you do know that you are making progress is when you can express your own opinion or your

own thought about something without being afraid. That if you get repercussions, you're still going to hold your...

RACHEL: ...that's okay.

NATALIE: Yeah, exactly. You can tolerate that disapproval and you still... You don't step back and go, "Oh, maybe I'm wrong." Now, that's not to say we can't take feedback. I'm just saying that if you really love roses and someone says — this happened to me — and someone says, "Do you like that? I didn't know you like that. I don't really think that you like that," I would step back and I would go, "Well, maybe I don't. Huh." And I wasn't really sure what I liked or didn't like.

RACHEL: My husband used to tell me how I felt. Looking back on that now, it would make me angry at that time and I would sort of joke around, like, "You don't get to tell me how I feel about things." And he would sort of chuckle at me like, "Haha — look at the cute little girl who thinks she can assert herself." But it was always in the context of, "Well, I know you so well." We'd been married since we were eighteen and we'd sort of grown up together (he hadn't really grown up) so he knew me. Oh, absolutely he did. He knew me. But it's not in a way where he was working for my good.

NATALIE: Yeah. Lots of crazy stuff.

RACHEL: I think that's another way to know you're healing is you look back and you're even more so like, "That was really awful."

NATALIE: Yes, it was. It was really awful. Okay, so here's the thing though, and this was something that when the light bulb went on for me in this, it really opened up a lot of things for me as far as understanding how things worked. But when I started first learning about boundaries, I could really understand how I was allowing other people into my house and yard and I was allowing them to control it. I could get that. I could understand that I needed to get them out of there and I needed to take personal responsibility.

But what I didn't realize was that I was actually crossing over into my husband's yard and taking responsibility for his stuff, or even my kids — crossing over into their yards and trying to take responsibility for their stuff. Or even trying to control my family of origin. We would get together and I would try to control certain things in order to protect myself, okay? So can you think of any areas in your life where you look back and you go, "I was crossing boundaries and I had to learn how to step back and learn how to do that"?

RACHEL: All sorts of ways, not only with my husband, although I was always trying to help him to be better, to mature, for sure, and pointing things out, definitely. But I think that the thing that strikes me is looking back, I was mentoring other young Christian women and giving them advice. And it was always from a place of, "Well, you need to be doing this" instead of coming alongside them and helping them see things for themselves and just being the support for them. And that's one of the things I cringe about — using the Bible as a list of rules instead of a guide on grace and imposing that on other people.

And so what that does is it negates the individual responsibility of that person before God and their individual relationship and puts you in the place of God, which is never where we're supposed to be, and imposing something on them that is the opposite of what God wants for us in our relationships. We're supposed to come alongside each other. We're supposed to look at each other as equals and love one another and absolutely use discernment to offer advice, but never from a place of hierarchy or judgment or anything other than love, really.

NATALIE: Right. Well, and even the advice offering, I now practice where I don't give advice unless someone asks me for it. I'm not talking about with my kids, but I'm talking about with other adults. If they don't ask me for advice, I don't give it. Now, I could say, "I have some thoughts about that. Would you be interested in hearing them?" But I don't jump in and offer advice unless they've actually asked me for it. So I don't know. It's an invitation to come over. I'm waiting for them to open the gate and invite me over, and then once they do that, then I can say, "Hey, these roses need some water."

RACHEL: Well, ultimately the choice is theirs, right? They can take your advice or they can choose not to, and it has no bearing on your value as a person or even the value of your advice. It's totally up to them. What a novel concept.

NATALIE: I know, I know. So when it came towards the end of my other marriage, I started realizing how I was trying to get my husband to change so that we could stay together, because I had finally come to the place where I knew that if things weren't going to change, I was going to be done with the marriage. So then I became very desperate to get him to change and get other people on the outside... Here I was trying to control other people too, like, "No, no, you need to come in here and you need to help me." And I got very demanding that people would gather around us and fix this marriage by fixing him.

But it wasn't until I finally let go, that's when the light bulb started going off, and I'm like, "I am really trying to control this situation here. I need to let go. I need to let my

husband do what he wants to do and go his way. I need to let these people have their opinions and let them go their way. And I need to take responsibility for myself." And when I did that, everything fell apart as far as my relationships with all of those people, because that's when I found out that they were only interested in relationship with me if I was doing what they wanted me to do. They wanted to control me and I wanted to control them.

But when I disengaged, that made them angry, and that was the end of all of that. It was the end of my marriage. It was the end of my going to that church. It was the end of a lot of relationships that I had. But I grew up during that period of time. I went from being a child to being an adult, standing on my own two feet. And it's been a great adventure ever since.

RACHEL: It has. It's painful, growing pains and pains from the wounds of those relationships that they leave in your life. But it is absolutely worth it. Cannot recommend it enough. And the thing is, I'm guessing for you it's the same as what I've experienced, is that you start to put God where God goes, and your relationship with Him is more deep. It's more significant. It's more of a significant role in your life than it's ever played before, even if you've been a Christian for most of your life. It's putting people where they go and putting God where He goes and aligning everything according to that.

NATALIE: I'm so glad that you brought up that point. That is absolutely right. And we take responsibility for ourselves, but we are always under that protection of that relationship with Jesus. And He is our authority and He is who we answer to. You know the story of the talents in the Bible where the man leaves and he leaves one guy two talents and one guy five and one guy one, and they are accountable to that master for what they do with their talents. And two of them actually invest and they take some risks and they end up doubling, and that's great. But the one hid his talents. But the point is that we're not accountable to everybody else. We're just accountable to God for that. So that's important.

RACHEL: Well, and I want to point out on the talent parable, why did the person who got one talent hide it? It was out of fear, right? He was afraid. And I think that's something that we have to deal with in this situation when we're building boundaries, is that there is that really profound fear that we have been living in, and trusting that God is there and allowing that to give us the courage to move forward in this way — it takes a lot of faith, I think.

NATALIE: Yep. Okay, that's the end of this episode, but this is actually just Part One of

two episodes. So next week we're going to come back and we're going to talk about what happens when you do set boundaries. So what does that look like and how do people react when we begin to set boundaries? How do they react and how does that affect our lives? And so that's going to be the topic next week.

So Rachel, thanks for joining me today. And for the rest of you, if you want to learn more, you can go to my website, flyingfreenow.com, and you can get on my mailing list. It's easy. And you hear about the podcasts and any other articles that I write or whatever else that we're doing. I've been doing these little spoofy Facebook... I've been mocking Christian modern gurus lately, so you never know what we're going to come up with. Okay, that's it. Fly free.