

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SET BOUNDARIES WITH AN EMOTIONAL ABUSER?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://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 13 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, Rachel and I are going to be continuing our discussion from last week where we talked about setting boundaries. Today we're going to talk about what happens when you do set boundaries. As a recap, last week we talked about what boundaries are. It's basically having your own house and yard. Everyone in the world has their very own house and yard that they are in charge of. Your house and yard represent who you are as a person. Crossing boundaries means when you go over into someone else's yard and try to rearrange their flower garden, or when they come over to your house and insist on rearranging your furniture or redecorating your home in a way they would like but you don't like.

One of the things I forgot to bring out in last week's session, which I think you can make a case for, is the definition of abuse being someone causing you to be unable to maintain your personal boundaries due to these outside forces beyond your control. Basically, abuse would be someone coming into your house and yard and taking over for you and saying, "You have no right to your own house and yard. I will take over and take care of everything that needs to be done in your house and yard, and you will do none of it." Kind of an enmeshment. Anyway, Rachel, hi!

RACHEL: Hi. I'm so glad to talk about this. This is so vitally important for healthy relationships.

NATALIE: It is. We talked last week about how this is the difference between being in a childlike mode where our parents take care of our house and yard until we are an adult... and unfortunately, many people stay in that childlike mode and always allow other people to take care of their house and yard rather than taking control of their own house and yard. You'll hear religious reasons for that, why that is good and Christian. For example, some Christian people believe that a father should always have control over his daughter's house and yard until she is turned over to her husband, and then her husband takes over control of her house and yard. But is that really what the Bible teaches? That someone else is going to be accountable for your house and yard? That someone else needs to take responsibility for your house and yard? Is that what God teaches? I don't see that.

RACHEL: I don't see it at all. I see people who are responsible for themselves, and God holds them accountable individually. You see that all over the Bible.

NATALIE: Yes. Regardless of whether you are male or female, whatever race you are, whatever your socio-economic status is, it doesn't matter. You are a human being, and you are directly responsible and accountable before God for what you choose to do with the life that He gave you. "The life" meaning the house and yard that He gave you.

RACHEL: Exactly.

NATALIE: So setting boundaries, to recap, is saying, "This is where my fence is, and this is where I'm in charge of who I'm going to allow into my house and yard and who I'm not going to allow in. I also need to respect the houses and yards of other people." I'm not going to cross over into my neighbor's yard and say, "Hey. You haven't been watering your roses and they are dying. So I came over to water your roses for you." Or, "Hey, your roses are dying because they haven't been watered. You'd better get to watering those roses." I'm not going to do that because that is their house and yard. Now, if they come over to the fence that divides us and say, "Hey, my roses are dying. Do you have any good ideas for what I could do to help my roses not die anymore?" Then they've given me an invitation. I can look at the rose garden and say, "They look like they haven't had anything to drink for a long time. Why don't you give them some water?" That's fine.

RACHEL: To expand on that, you can say, "Why don't you go water them?" Or if they say, "Hey, I'm going to be out of town. Would you mind watering them while I'm gone for this specific amount of time?" Sure, go over there and do that. But it's all within the boundaries of individual responsibility.

NATALIE: Yes. So far, we've been talking in terms of a metaphor. Some of our listeners live in apartments. They don't live in a house with a yard. We're not talking about that. We mean that your house and your yard represent your personhood: who you are as a person and anything under your jurisdiction that you are responsible for. Our topic for today is "what happens when you set boundaries?" The problem is that not everyone likes boundaries. If you are coming out of an abusive situation, you've been living with someone who is not interested in boundaries at all, and you are trying to establish them. Maybe you're still living with this person who's not respecting your boundaries. Rachel, maybe you can talk about a time when you set a boundary, what happened when you set it, and what was your response to what happened?

RACHEL: There were hardly any boundaries in my marriage until I started to wake up to

what was really going on and put a diagnosis to it, which was that it was tremendously abusive. I was trying to figure out what to do, so I started setting boundaries. It started out as some very minor things. He kept crossing them because that's what he was used to doing and that's what I had allowed him to do for the entirety of our marriage. I remember it got to the point where I realized I had to go start sleeping in a different space in our house. I remember grabbing my pillow from our bed. He was getting ready for bed and I said, "I'm going to go sleep in the guest room." There were tears, and those tears quickly turned into guilt and the accusation that I didn't love him.

This was one of the most rigid boundaries I had ever put down, and I felt horrible because I was so accustomed to expressing my love for him by allowing him to do whatever he wanted and to tell me to do whatever he wanted me to do. As I've recovered, I have realized how much that whole paradigm has flipped. My love for him now is expressed in not allowing him to do that anymore because that's not good for him. When people start learning how to implement boundaries in their life... I know I was confused about what that looks like in everyday situations. I think a good rule of thumb is that boundaries are all about me and what I'm going to do. It's not about imposing punishment on someone else.

For example, I was going to go to the other room not because I didn't love him, as I said, or I was trying to get back at him somehow. It was, "I have to feel safe, and since he has continued to exhibit behavior that is not in step with a healthy relationship as I am coming to understand it, I've got to put some space between us for myself. I'm going to take what I am responsible for and manage it in this way." Like I said, it was scary because, as I referenced last week, my entire identity was wrapped up in what people thought about me and the approval I got from other people. Thankfully, I had a good friend who helped me to stay strong. I think that is so important when you are learning what boundaries look like in your life. To have someone who can encourage you and come alongside you and say, "Nope. You're not wrong! You shouldn't feel guilty about this. This is okay. It may feel terrible, but that doesn't mean that it's bad." Someone that can remind you of that in those moments of pain when you are first putting up your fence and saying, "You can't come in here right now when you are going to act like that," is important.

NATALIE: Yeah, that is important that you have support. Another example that I can think of, and I talk about this in my book, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage." We had a situation where my ex-husband didn't want me to fill up the gas tank. He wanted to fill it up for me, which sounds nice, right? He had some kind of coupon code, so he wanted to take it to a certain gas station and fill it up using this card, and he asked me not to fill it up. It wasn't just my car. We had a shared van. The

only problem was that he would neglect to keep it filled. It would run low, and then I would have to take the kids somewhere or do something and it would be really, really low. I would feel like I couldn't fill it up. (I know this sounds dorky, but this is the way my life was.) So three different times (it takes me a long time to learn things) I ran out of gas in my effort to honor my husband's wishes. All three times God took care of me. All three times were precarious situations. You never know when you're going to run out of gas. It could be on the freeway, it could be in the middle of traffic. I had kids in the car all three times as well.

The first two times I said, "I don't want to run out of gas. If you want to fill it up with your own coupon code, then I really need you to keep an eye on it." But I realized that what was happening was that I was not taking responsibility. Now, looking back, I think, "What a dork I was! Who cares if he gets mad at you. Just don't run out of gas!" Eventually, I got it. After the third time I told him, "I'm going to be keeping the gas tank filled on my own from now on." I did. I had never run out of gas before that, and I've never run out of gas since then. So I took ownership of my own life.

Even though he was my husband and I was under this thinking that I had to do everything that my husband told me, I finally said "No. I'm not going to be doing that. It's not healthy for me. I'm putting myself and my kids in danger by doing that. So I'm not going to do that anymore." Those are both examples of how we can set our own boundaries and take responsibility for our own house and yard. But sometimes I think we take responsibility for our husbands and their lack, or we take responsibility for other people in our lives like our friends. We try to cover for them, but we are crossing their boundaries. We think that's loving because we are taking care of them. But it's actually not loving, because we are crossing over into their house and yard and taking over for them. We think we're helping them out, but all we are really doing is enabling them to not take responsibility for their own lives. This is not healthy for you. It's not healthy for them. Can you think of any examples of where you maybe tried to be helpful but...?

RACHEL: This is an everyday exercise as I learn what it's like to parent a teenager. My son is fourteen, and there are the effects from being in an unhealthy environment for most of his life. I was so accustomed to covering up for his dad and feeling guilty because his dad wasn't what I had envisioned as someone that I wanted to parent with. I think I'm now learning how to help him to see the responsibility he has in his own life. But I still catch myself in any everyday learning process of figuring out what this looks like in relationship to him. He needs to make sure that he has clothes for himself instead of me asking, "Hey, how's your laundry situation?" If he doesn't have the clothes he wants to wear, he's going to learn to make sure to think ahead in order to have the

look he wants, which is very important at his age. Those are simple things.

I'm also learning that the balance of responsibility that he witnessed growing up was so uneven. The rule in our house was that I took care of the inside and my husband took care of the outside (which is convenient because half the year there's hardly anything with the exception of a little snow). It sounded okay, but it didn't turn out that way. I would take care of a lot of things inside the house. So I learned how to make sure that my son has responsibility. It's okay to tell him to go do the dishes. He's going to be upset about that, but that's normal teenage behavior and not a reflection on me as a parent. That's a simple example, but something I am still wrestling with.

We've talked about this, Natalie, but for women who have been divorced, it is easy to feel guilty about the situation that your kids have been in and how you never, ever wanted that. If you are the one who initiated the actual legal proceedings as I did, it can be even more confusing because that was never something you wanted. Sometimes that guilt can spill over to enabling the kids and teens into being less responsible than what is good for them. The book, "Boundaries With Teens," has been really helpful for me to see that this is what that love for him expressed in teaching him to be a healthy adult should look like. I didn't have good examples of boundaries growing up. That is part of why I was matched up with my husband, because he treated me the way I was used to being treated as I'd grown up. There were no examples of healthy boundaries in my life. I am having to re-parent myself and teach myself in those ways. It's an everyday journey.

NATALIE: When we allow other people to come over into our house and yard and then we eventually learn, "I need to take care of my own house and yard, so I need to ask these people to all leave now: 'You guys can all go now and take care of your own house and yard,'" usually what happens is that those people are used to controlling you. They are used to telling you what to do. They are used to you meeting their needs. (That would be you in their house and yard.) There's a lot of crossing over of boundaries. When you establish those clear boundaries around yourself, you start taking care of yourself and start letting them go, you stop taking care of their rose garden and start taking care of yours, then people tend to get upset about that. They don't like that. You are upsetting the status quo. You're changing things up. The relationship dynamics are going to change. It is going to be extremely uncomfortable. It's a double whammy because you are already, as you described, feeling guilty. You're not sure if it's what you should be doing. Then you have this person who is mad at you. They are trying to reinforce that guilt, blame you when things fall apart, when their rose garden is no longer blooming because you aren't over there fixing it for them, or when they are feeling rejected because you won't let them come over and do whatever they

want to do. They are going to be upset and that will be hard, but it's necessary.

When you were talking about the kid thing (and I run into this with my kids all the time), when two kids will have a fight, they will want me to fix it. They want me to be the arbitrator and fix it. We're talking older kids, not little kids. We're not talking two and three year olds but thirteen and fifteen year olds. My stand now is that it's not really my job to fix the fight between them. Usually, someone is being mean to the other one. I try to teach them boundaries where I say, "If someone is crossing into your yard and slapping red paint all over your house, then you need to get away from that person. They might not stop." That's where this illustration breaks down because you can't move the house. Let's try this example. If you are sitting next to someone and they keep kicking you in the shin, you would say, "Can you please stop? That hurts." If they just look at you and keep kicking, what can you do at that point?

RACHEL: Right. Get up and move.

NATALIE: So my kid will say, "That's not fair! I wanted to stay on the chair. I shouldn't have to get up and move. They need to stop kicking." Well, they are right! It's not fair! It's not fair that the kicker keeps getting to kick. But we cannot control other people. We can't control a kicker. A kicker is a kicker! If you don't want to be kicked, don't hang out with kickers.

RACHEL: Yes. Exactly.

NATALIE: It's not fair. You want to inhabit that space where the kicker is, but you aren't going to be able to. You need to find a separate space.

RACHEL: Yep. It's hard because it isn't fair. For all the work we put in and for all the love and long-suffering we devoted to our marriages... Like I said earlier, I was the one who initiated the divorce proceedings. I had to get up and move away from the kicker because he wasn't going to do it. He had a great set-up. He was enjoying it. That's the way he wanted it. So yes, it's not fair, but it's what you must do. It's your responsibility, if you choose to live in truth and in reality, to say, "No more!"

NATALIE: If we bring this back to in the home and dealing with abuse from an intimate partner, they are going to blame you. They're going to get very angry with you. They will possibly spread lies about you. They're going to accuse you of being mean. We talked at the very beginning of the last episode about how people think that setting boundaries is mean. They think if you have a boundary you are being mean.

Here's a great example. People might ask you to do something for them, but you might be busy. Let's say you have a jam-packed week with almost no margin or down time. In the entire week you have one night free, and you were going to use that night to recover and recuperate. But somebody, maybe a friend, comes along and says, "I really need you to do this thing that night," and you say "No." If they are used to getting what they want from you, they may say "Well, why not? Don't you have that night free?" You might feel guilty and then think "Well, I do have that night free, but it's the only free night that I have." If you've been taught that you need to die to yourself, you need to be unselfish, you need to be giving, and you need to be doing ministry 24/7, then of course you are going to feel super guilty if you say no. You're going to feel like you have to say yes. This is what we're talking about. This is boundaries. This is where you say, "My rose garden needs some watering, but it also needs some sunshine and some rest. I'm going to give myself some rest that night, and I don't have to meet everybody's needs. Maybe there's another way this person could get their need met, and it doesn't have to be me."

RACHEL: Right. It's funny because Jesus wasn't doing ministry 24/7. We've talked about this, but He went off to rest. He would flee from the multitudes of people who wanted something from Him. Obviously He was the light in that world, so people were attracted to that light. Yet He would go off to recharge His light from time with His Father, time in rest, time for prayer, etc. So I think we need to be modeling that in our own lives as well and using the gifts God has given us, stewarding them wisely, which includes both using them and recharging them.

NATALIE: Yes. Recently there's a lady I know who is going through chemotherapy for cancer, and she was really burnt out on her life. She is extremely compassionate, caring, kind, one of the most loving people you would probably ever meet. But because of that propensity that she had to tend to want to help everybody, she was literally burning the candle at both ends. When she ended up getting cancer, she realized it because that obviously put everything at a stop. She could no longer be the person who was giving, giving, giving. Now she was in this position of having to accept help from other people, which is very difficult to do when you are used to just giving. But it has also caused her to step back and realize, "When I get done with the chemotherapy, how am I going to live my life differently? What kinds of protections am I going to put up around myself? What kind of margin am I going to build into my life?"

At one point I brought her a meal, and she said, "I don't know that I would have had time to bring anybody a meal because I didn't have any margin. There was no margin in my life." I don't bring meals to everybody who needs a meal, either. I can't do that because I have to have margin in my life. But if we have some built-in margin in our lives and we're taking good care of those boundaries for ourselves, we have spaces

where we can do cartwheels. We have spaces where we don't feel hemmed in and closed in by all the demands that are on our lives. We have to. Everyone has a limited number of hours in their life. You have to figure out how you are going to use those hours not just to take care of the other people in your life like your children or your spouse if you're married, but how to take care of yourself so that you can turn around from a place of strength and health and help others from that place rather than a place of total and utter exhaustion, burn-out, and guilt. Who wants to help out of guilt, anyway?

RACHEL: It's not truthful. You're giving this to someone but your heart isn't there. You are sort of resenting the fact that it took away from these other things, so it's not truthful. What I hear you describing, Natalie, are boundaries with yourself, because you may be divided about what your desires are. You desire to go out and make meals for every chemo patient in the Twin Cities or whatever, but it's just not possible. You realize, "I'm going to have some boundaries with myself and say 'no' to that desire and make this meal for my one friend out of the authenticity of my love for her and our relationship and my care for her, and do it with a completely loving and cheerful heart out of the space that I have for her in my life."

NATALIE: Right. So what I'm hearing you describe is understanding your own limits, understanding where your fence stops.

RACHEL: Exactly!

NATALIE: Because I don't have the ability to do any more than what's within my house and yard. It's just very freeing to feel like I have all this opportunity here and I don't have to overextend myself. I also don't have to take control of other people and control their lives, and I don't have to let them control my life. I get to decide. I think we'll wrap it up right there. I think that's a good ending point.

RACHEL: Boundaries are worth it. They are worth the pain, the guilt, and the insecurity that you feel as you are learning to establish these and what it looks like in your life. It's not going to be perfect. You may accidentally cross into someone else's boundaries or not do it the right way, but just keep practicing and ask God and His Holy Spirit to guide you as you are figuring this out. There is so much grace.

NATALIE: Yes. All right. Thanks, Rachel, for joining me today. For the rest of you, fly free!