

Boundaries Along the Way

TRANSCRIPT (AUTO-GENERATED)

Wayform number 8, boundaries. Unlimited. It's a useful word for advertising.

It's an attractive word. Unlimited. NorthernLife Unlimited could be a tagline for our church, but would it be true?

God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, but is life meant to be unlimited?

Quoting Jesus from his sermon on the Mount, James says in James 5 12, Above all my brothers and sisters, do not swear, not by heaven or by earth or by anything else, all you need to say is a simple yes or no. It's what God did in Genesis.

He said to the sea, No, the land is your boundary. He said to the atmosphere, No, you can't keep extending into space. He said to the cheetah, Yes, you can run fast, but no, you can't fly like the owl.

When God created humanity, He said yes and no. Yes to so many possibilities, but no to eating from one tree in the garden.

After Adam and Eve had sinned, God put boundaries on how long they were to live and said no to them eating of the tree of eternal life. Life is not unlimited, but it's still amazing.

Courage is not the absence of fear and neither is freedom the absence of limits. Limits are boundaries. We're designed by our Creator to live within His loving boundaries.

There's a time to say yes and a time to say no. Children thrive when they are given clear boundaries. So do adults.

Boundaries are an essential component in the way of the Master. Boundaries or limits are a crucial aspect to following Jesus. We're going to see that holiness requires boundaries, humility requires boundaries, and wholeness requires boundaries.

Holiness, humility and wholeness. Boundaries define holiness. Hebrews 12, 14 says, Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.

Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. We are called to live by the grace of God, holy lives. Holiness is obviously part of spiritual formation.

We are graciously like Jesus because we are clothed in his righteousness by faith, but we are also becoming more and more like him in our behaviour. At the core of holiness is yes and no.

We quoted James before as he quoted Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, Again you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.

But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Jesus goes right to the heart of why people swear oaths. He knows that they do it to impress others with their sincerity and reliability. It's really just a method for people to get their own way, a tool for manipulation.

Swearing by a greater power lends weight to our words, and is designed to override the judgment of others. Jesus basically says, don't be so duplicitous. If you mean yes, say it the same for no.

Yes and no provide profoundly simple yet abundantly clear boundaries. Much of following Jesus when it comes to personal holiness can be brought back to yes and no. Consider our thought life.

Jesus goes directly to the thoughts of an individual when he describes a righteousness which surpasses that of the Pharisees in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5.27 says, You've heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery.

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Can I look lustfully at another person? The answer for personal holiness is no, because Jesus said so.

He said our thought life matters. As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10.5, we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

The Bible says regarding our inner world, Colossians 3, put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

You used to walk in these ways in the life you once lived, but now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these, anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips.

Can you see how many of these sins live in our thoughts before they appear in our actions? I might be stating the obvious, but personal holiness in spiritual formation is all about yes and no. It's about limits.

Jesus says, let your yes be yes and your no no. Yes, Jesus is my Lord, and I will listen to him or no, he's not my Lord. I'm not suggesting we won't struggle with sin in our thoughts.

Thinking a thought is not sin until we allow it to find a home in our mind or put it into action. The Bible clearly teaches that there are boundaries for our thoughts without which we will not be able to live a holy life.

Boundaries for personal holiness are required for our thought life and also for our actions. Galatians 5.19 says, The acts of the flesh are obvious.

Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like.

I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. I grew up going to church and I was a Christian from a young age, but I never came across this verse until I was nearly 20 years old and it stunned me.

There are certain behaviors which are categorically outlawed by God. There are boundary markers. What about Hebrews 13.4 and 1 Corinthians 7?

Hebrews says, Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

1 Corinthians 7, Now for the matters you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband. Now to the unmarried and the widows, I say, it is good for them to stay unmarried as I do.

But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. Contrary to what many Christians assume these days, the Bible does teach that there is a boundary regarding sex outside of marriage.

One of the boundary limits is that sex is designed by God to be experienced within the safe confines of godly marriage. Yes and no are boundaries for our thought life and for our actions.

So firstly, boundaries define holiness in the way of the Master. And secondly, boundaries define humility.

We are currently living in a time in history where everyone tends to get a trophy, and everyone is told they can do anything they desire with their lives.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, Just as a body, though one has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so, the body is not made up of one part, but many.

Now if the foot should say, Because I am not a hand, I don't belong to the body, it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

And if the ear should say, Because I am not an eye, I don't belong to the body, it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?

If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The Bible says we're different. We have different dreams about what we're going to do with our life.

We're good at different things, and these limitations actually keep us humble. Have you discovered the joy of finding out you're not good at everything? It's a limit which is enormously freeing.

You might have heard of Clifton's Strengthfinder. It's a questionnaire designed to find your strengths, and out of 34 strengths you get given your top 5, which you're meant to focus on rather than your weaknesses.

It's a corporate team building tool, but used by churches all over the world too. I've known it several times. Like many people, I've received my results and thought, I'd rather be a different person.

So the next time I answered the questions differently, hoping to completely change my results. After completing the questionnaire, I still got the same top 5 just in a different order. The church is a body.

We have different stories, different skills and experiences, different manifestations of the Spirit's gifts in our lives. We're not good at everything and that's okay. Limitations are actually a gift from the Lord.

Limitations develop humility and interdependence. Boundaries on our abilities, boundaries on our opportunities, are gifts from God.

As parents, Leanne and I believe one of our greatest tasks is to communicate to our kids what their bent is as we have observed them throughout their lives.

Part of helping our children discover what they're good at is carefully identifying what they're not so good at. Humility embraces limits with grace. Of course, there are times when we do need to push our limits.

This can be exhilarating and stretching for us as individuals, but on the whole, boundaries help humility. Have you ever considered the incarnation of Jesus?

That is, the fact that he was God who became a human being and that this is a study in humble acceptance of limits. Jesus accepted personal limits in meeting his personal needs. He ate healthy foods, got the sleep he needed and even took naps.

He took time to relax and did a lot of walking. He sought the company of friends because he needed community. He withdrew from the crowds to go away on retreat alone or with friends because he accepted the limits of his energy.

He left one city to go to another because he couldn't be in two places at the same time, even though as God he could have.

Spiritual formation requires limits for our own holiness, limits for us to remain humble, and limits for wholeness in community. Jesus let his yes be yes and his no no in relationships with his community, and we should too.

Jesus said no to inappropriate behavior because he believed in boundaries regarding many things. Let me suggest a few. He believed in boundaries regarding the demands of others.

He withdrew from the crowds who wanted him for one on one time with the Father, Luke 5, 15 and 16. Yet the news about him spread all the more so that the crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

But Jesus often withdrew, the Bible says, to lonely places and prayed. He set boundaries in that he said no to abuse, Luke 4, 28. All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

They got up, drove him out of the town and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. He said no to 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 in Matthew 12. He said no to 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. He said no to manipulation. Peter took him aside, Matthew 16, and began to rebuke him.

Never, Lord, he said, this shall never happen to you. Jesus turned and said to Peter, get behind me, Satan. You're a stumbling block to me.

You don't have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns. He said no to pride. He didn't heal those who were too proud to trust him, Matthew 13.

And he did not do many miracles because of their lack of faith. He said no to 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.

That's Matthew 21. He said no to 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.

He said no to the 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. Jesus had expectations for people in need.

Two blind men came 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.

To another, Jesus asked, do you want to get well? For 38 years, the invalid at the Sheepgate 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 take responsibility for himself. John 5, 1-14. Are you getting the point?

Wholeness in community is not a boundary-less community. When broken and dysfunctional people are not given limits on their behaviour, it's impossible to see spirit-filled kingdom community. The key word for wholeness is differentiation.

I can love you without being swept up into the whirlpool of your dysfunction, and the same is true regarding my dysfunction. Spiritual formation in the way of the Master involves differentiation.

Limits are required for holiness, they are required for humility, and they are required for wholeness in community. Let your yes be yes, and your no, no. Who do you need to say no to?

Who do you need to say yes to? To be formed more into the likeness of Christ. The boundaries of yes and no are crucial to the way of the Master.

Once upon a time there lived a man who had given a great deal of thought and effort to determine what he wanted from life. Then one day a door opened for him to actually live his dream.

The opportunity would be available only for a short time, and he would have to embark on a long journey to take hold of it. He began walking and grew more and more excited as he envisioned his future dream becoming a reality.

As he hurried along, however, he came to a bridge high above a dangerous, rapidly flowing river. As he started across the bridge, he noticed a stranger approaching him from the opposite direction.

The man had a rope wrapped many times around his waist. The rope looked like it might stretch to a length of at least 30 feet. The stranger began to unwrap the rope as he walked.

Just as the two men were about to meet, the stranger said, Pardon me, sir, would you be so kind as to hold the end of this rope for me? Without thinking, almost instinctively, the man reached out and took the rope. Thank you, said the stranger.

He then added, Two hands now, and remember, hold tight. At that point the stranger jumped off the bridge.

The strong pull from the now extended rope was so strong, it almost dragged the man over the side of the bridge into the treacherous river below. He shouted over the railing, What are you trying to do? Just hold tight, the stranger called back.

This is ridiculous, the man thought. He began trying to haul the stranger up, but the task was beyond his strength. Why did you do this?

he yelled in frustration over the edge. Remember, said the stranger, If you let go, I will die. The man was stumped.

If I let go all my life, I will always regret I let this stranger die. If I stay, I'll never reach my dreams or destiny. Finally, he said, I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own.

From this moment on, I give the power of choice for your own life back to you. What do you mean? the stranger asked, clearly afraid.

I mean simply, it's up to you. You decide your future. I will be the counterweight.

You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will tug some from here. The man unwound the rope from around his waist and braced himself to be a counterweight.

You cannot mean what you say, the stranger shrieked. You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility.

What could be so important that you'd let me die? After a long silence, the man on the bridge said slowly, I accept your choice. He let go of the rope and continued on his journey over the bridge.

It's a jarring story, but it's the truth. Life in the way of the Master has boundaries. We need boundaries in our thought life.

The Bible gives us these limits. We need boundaries in our actions. Praise God he has given us these also.

They're required for living a holy life in Christ. We need limits to remind us to be humble. Embrace them as a gift from God.

We need boundaries in relationship. Yes and no are allowed in godly community. Yes and no are required in godly community.

Jesus gives us the perfect example of holiness, humility and wholeness in relationship. The way of the master is limited to the glory of God. Amen.