

# When Setting Boundaries Is the Best Choice for Your Marriage

Forgiveness is absolutely necessary, but sometimes it's not enough. Communication is vital, but it doesn't always change things. Sometimes your spouse's bad behavior continues, and there's no evidence it's changing anytime soon. Setting boundaries in your marriage at such times is never easy, but sometimes it's the best thing for your relationship.

Let me be clear: Setting boundaries because your spouse doesn't cook the kind of food you enjoy, forgets your anniversary or desires sex at a different frequency than you do is not what we're talking about. We're talking about persistent serious destructive behavior; substance abuse, physical or verbal violence, obtaining sexual gratification through pornography or an affair and so on. Your spouse is not abusing you because they don't meet your needs; it becomes abuse when that spouse is actively seeking to harm you. Addiction, infidelity or other gross harm or neglect is where serious boundaries must come in.

The danger in talking about this is that some spouse may grab onto this concept of boundaries as a way to manipulate their husband or wife into doing what they want. Another spouse may stay in a seriously destructive marriage too long because it's not "bad enough." Neither is appropriate. This is not about your happiness, nor is it about blame or control. It's about protection.

With those disclaimers in mind, here are some things to know about setting boundaries when your spouse is continuing to engage in destructive behavior.

## **Start With Your Heart**

The only way you can set appropriate boundaries is when your own heart is clear. For that, you need to understand at least some of God's perspective on your marriage. Spend some time seriously seeking His perspective. You can't do this right from a heart full of bitterness and spite. You may feel very hurt; that's why you need to set boundaries. But deal with the infection of bitterness first as much as possible.

In dealing with your own heart you may well see areas where you can, could, or should have done things differently. That's a separate issue from setting boundaries. Even if you could have been more aware of your spouse's sexual desires, their pornography use is *not* about you. Your spouse's anger or substance abuse is *not* about how you didn't meet their needs. Yes, the Holy Spirit will undoubtedly have things He needs to work on with you, but that's not what boundaries are about.

## **Protection, Not Punishment**

Setting boundaries with your spouse is not for the purpose of punishing them. If you're trying to exact revenge for how your spouse hurt you, that's an issue for forgiveness, not boundaries. Through forgiveness, you give up your right to exact revenge. But if your spouse is still acting badly, you may need to protect yourself from further harm. You may well need to both forgive and set boundaries.

Your boundary may feel like punishment to your spouse; that's not the deciding factor. What's important is that the boundary is necessary to protect you from getting hurt going forward. In every marriage the two broken people involved will wound each other. If it's small stuff, let it go! But if ongoing destructive behavior is happening, boundaries are necessary.

## **It's About You, Not Them**

Boundaries are not for the purpose of changing your spouse. If

that's your reason for considering boundaries, stop right there. The boundaries you set may be one tool God uses in helping your spouse become willing to change, but that's not up to you.

For example, withholding money from your wife because she is withholding sex from you is not a healthy boundary. That kind of dysfunction needs communication, not manipulation. However, requiring internet blocking software such as Covenant Eyes on all your family's devices would be an appropriate boundary if your spouse is using pornography. That is protecting your body and/or heart from your spouse's destructive sexual behavior.

If your spouse gets angry and verbally violent, a boundary might be, "When you become angry, I'm going to leave the room until it's safe to return." If your spouse is acting out sexually, a boundary might be, "I will work with you on restoring our relationship, but I will not have sex with you until this is dealt with." It's not about controlling your spouse; it's about protecting your mind, heart, and body from further harm.

## **Stay on Your Knees**

Keep seeking God's perspective. No one but He can tell you what is "enough." Sometimes God releases you from a marriage if your spouse's vote is persistently preventing God from doing the restoration He wants to do. God may also use your very boundary-setting as a means of getting through to your spouse's heart so that He can do what He wanted to do all along. That's His department.

In the meantime, stay on your knees. Remain alert to how God may be working in your marriage. Keep your own heart soft before Him, even if you need to protect it from your spouse's behavior. You will need God's wisdom, comfort, peace and presence, regardless of what happens in your marriage.

May any boundaries you set be used by God in the

transformation of your marriage.

**Your Turn:** *Have you had to set any boundaries in your marriage? How did that work out? Do you need to set any boundaries now? Leave a comment below.* {eo}

**Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley** is both a board-certified OB-GYN physician and an ordained doctor of ministry. As an author and speaker, she loves helping people discover the Fully Alive kind of life Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at .

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